Weeds

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WEEDS

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ETC., ETC.

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THE TRAGEDY OF THE PYRAMIDS
THE ADMIRAL
MY SON RICHARD
A JAPANESE MARRIAGE
ETC., ETC.
AND MANY BOOKS OF TRAVEL

J. E. Faulkner.

WEEDS

A Story of Women Shifting for Themselves

BY

OLAVE POTTER

AND

DOUGLAS SLADEN

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PREFACE

"WEEDS" is an abbreviation for "Weeds that Encumber the Earth," and we have used it to signify the daughters of the well-off; the gentlewomen who by the failure of those who should have provided for them, are suddenly called upon to earn their living in London without any training for it. We have applied this name to them because your weed, according to the old definition, is a flower growing out of its proper place.

The cruelty of the situation can never be sufficiently emphasized. The very women who have been brought up to the idea that woman is a queen, born to be loved, honoured and cherished, have to go into situations where they are treated with a total absence of chivalry, and are not given a dog's chance—where they are not supposed to live at all or demand life; not supposed to have any time or money over for pleasure, which is the Sabbath of the Soul, but to be mere machines like the typewriters on which so many of them work.

The very women who have been brought up to spend money without regard to economy become amateur-casual-labourers, and have to take the work which is not

sufficiently remunerative to attract the trained worker, unless it be to supply pocket-money where the girl is kept by her relations, or to supply an ostensible means of living where the girl is maintained in luxury by her admirers.

There are almost enough women of these two classes to fill all the underpaid posts which are endurable. Practically, therefore, the untrained gentlewoman is a casual-labourer, picking up undesirable odd jobs.

" Weeds " deals with the vicissitudes of three women, Lesley Brydges, Agnes Openshaw, and Mary Strange, who would all of them have made admirable hostesses in the houses of their fathers or their husbands, had they continued in the sphere in which they were born. By the death of their parents they had to enter the labour market without the slightest training for it. They all had in their favour youth, good looks, and personal charm, therefore they had as good a chance as any women similarly placed in London.

London is full of gentlewomen without these advantages, waiting to do any honest work, but in danger of actual starvation. Mary Strange, who has a worse start than the others, and is older, comes perilously near the starvation-line in the pages of this book.

" Weeds " shows how the unfortunate victims of these circumstances are put on the rack of anxiety, privation and humiliation. It also shows how, before they sank

too deep in the hell of penury, Lesley and Agnes found themselves for a short time on the fringe of Bohemia—a society which, with less expenditure of money, gives its leisure to the pursuit of pleasure as frankly as the aristocracy and plutocracy do.

The pictures of Bohemian society as I knew it when I first returned to London some twenty years ago, may possess a sort of historical interest. Certain personalities are named, and painted in the foreground as faithfully as I can remember them. Others are veiled under pseudonyms, or only have certain of their traits sketched. Several chapters are devoted to this picture of Bohemia—of literary, artistic and theatrical society in London in the early Nineties.

This is mine, but Miss Potter has supplied the vivid details of the lives of the three women: one of whom toils at dull research work in libraries, seeks a footing in journalism in the office of an editor, who engages her to make love to her; acts as secretary in a situation where a vampire preys on her energy and leisure; works in one shop where she is treated with contumely, and in another where her health gives way; drudges as a general servant where she is nominally a nursery governess; is reduced to taking actual service as a house-parlourmaid; devils for an art critic, and so on—while of her two companions, one succumbs to temptation rather than exhaust her life, and the other wears herself out as a sempstress, an artist's model, a waitress in a humble restaurant, and in other starvation-jobs.

Much of the book is taken up with the struggles of these women, which threaten to be hopeless. But in the end Lesley is rescued by a man who was in love with her before the crash came; Agnes emerges with her nature unscathed from what is called with grim irony a life of pleasure; and Mary goes to the Colonies.

Miss Potter has for the best part of a year been living in the colony of educated women without a practical training who are battling for existence in London, and the experiences, which she describes in such a life-like manner, are drawn from the actual lives of these ladies, which may be taken as types of them all. Among these women are, God knows how many, sweet and beautiful flowers, though they are treated as weeds because they have no place in the "trim social garden" of modern civilization.

The plot is chiefly mine, but the idea of the book originated with Miss Potter. The educated poor are in danger of being forgotten in the flood of remedial legislation for the working classes. Their case may be only a side issue, but they are more in need of sympathy than anyone, for they have mental anguish, they are unaccustomed to hardships, and they have no efficient training.

Miss Potter has long had the undeserved miseries of these educated casual-labourers at heart, and has made a special study of the subject. And she has the necessary

first-hand knowledge of their trials and temptations, without which it would have been impossible to frame an adequate book on the subject.

In conclusion, I must say that the reader we especially wish to interest is the ordinary man of means. We wish to make him ask himself if he is taking the proper precautions against the women of his family being thrown upon the labour-market in this way, not only by providing for their future financially, but by giving them a training which will enable them, if they have to work for their daily bread, to command well-paid and desirable posts. We want him to be able to say, "My women shall never be weeds" with more justification than he can boast that "Britons never, never shall be slaves."

DOUGLAS SLADEN.

The Avenue House,
Richmond,
Surrey.

"Tu proverai sì come sa de sale
Il pane altrui, e com' è duro calle
Lo scendere e il salir per l' altrui scale."

Dante, Paradiso, XVII., 58.

("Thou shalt prove how salt doth taste the bread of others, and how hard a path it is to go up and down another's stairs.")

"Weeds that encumber the earth, and are only fit for the burning."

"Your weed is a flower growing out of its proper place."

WEEDS

THE PRELUDE

FROM CONVENT WINDOWS AT ASSISI

A BELL tinkled for the Elevation of the Host, and the little knot of worshippers knelt down upon the worn pavement, or bowed their heads while the swinging censers glowed in the darkness, and clouds of fragrant incense rose to the humble vault. It was the hour of Vespers in San Damiano, the tiny chapel among the olive gardens of Assisi, which was the cradle of the Franciscan legend, and later the home of St. Clare. It was very dark. Outside, the dusk of a sirocco day was veiling the Valley of Spoleto. Assisi on her hillside was like a man grown old with watching—all grey in the vaporous evening, with her towers and her Gothic houses and the olives below her walls, and even the distant mountains, shadowed, as though the world was wrapt in contemplation. Two brothers in brown habits and the officiating priest gravely intoned the service in front of the dim altar. The air was heavy with incense. Presently the little congregation, which only numbered seven, peasants who had paused on their way from work in their vineyards before they climbed the hill to their homes in Assisi, made their reverences and passed silently up the steps and out into the grey olive-garden.

When their footsteps died away, a girl, who had

been resting in the shadow by the door, went into the little chapel of the Miraculous Crucifix. The priest had disappeared, but one of the lay-brothers, who was busying himself behind the altar, came forward when he saw her, and asked if she would care to see the relics of St. Francis and St. Clare.

She shook her head, and answered in Italian, thanking him for his trouble, but saying that she had seen them many times, that she was resting on her way up the hill, that she had come to think, "*e forse per pregare*," she added, rather sadly.

The brother bowed, and went back to his task at the altar.

But notwithstanding the heaviness of incense in the air, which, even to her Protestant mind, seemed to heighten the sanctity of the spot, Lesley could not pray. She schooled herself to respond to the noble beauty of the Crucifix, seen darkly in the light of a taper floating on a vase of oil; she tried to think of Francis and his beloved sister in Christ, but even with the impassioned chanting of the young priest still ringing in her ears, she could not steady her thoughts to the level of prayer. Finally she gave up the attempt and abandoned herself to the appreciation of the peace and beauty of this dim little church, in which, more than anywhere in Assisi, the simplicity of Francis is preserved.

If there is an anodyne to pain, mental pain, it is to be found in the contemplation of beauty, in those moments when the personality of the watcher seems to flow out, to be merged in that which he contemplates. It is a sort of submission of our heart and brain, and that subconscious self which we call soul, to the hypnotic power of a greater personality; it is the yielding of our forces to a more powerful force, as complete as the yielding of our bodies to sleep. And indeed, it can be likened to nothing better than sleep, since it is the true repose of the soul, the re-creating of our higher selves.

Something of this thought came to Lesley Brydges as she wandered round the tiny chapel, content to let

her thoughts drift where they would in this backwater of peace.

She felt a great longing for simplicity; she would have given much to have recaptured the lost faith of childhood which she found still beautifying the lives of the Umbrian peasants in the valleys below Assisi; for the moment at any rate she was able to sink her personal trouble in an intuitive knowledge of, and sympathy for, the needless pain suffered by the world since the closing of the Gates of Eden, that pain which has always been one of the greatest motives in the creation of Beauty. For it is out of the suffering of Human Nature that beauty has been born; it is in the travail of the soul that the greatest pictures have been painted, the noblest statues carved, the best poems written; it is those who have dwelt in darkness who dedicate their lives to holding up the lamp of beauty to illuminate the ages. And indeed, what else is religion, the obvious solace of pain, but a plea for beauty?—not only the beauty of worship and faith, but the beauty of thought and life and deed.

It was here in Assisi that the eyes of Lesley Brydges's soul were opened. It was as though someone led her to a window, which had always in her memory been shuttered, and showed her a vista of the world. For the first time she felt the throb of it. For the first time she asked the meaning of the riddle of life. "Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy." Yes, they may close in, but it is when they are first perceived that the soul is born. Some shrink from it back to their animal selves, to others it is a great incentive to go forward, like the voice of one crying in the wilderness; to some it spells fear, to others endeavour—to all sadness, that heaviness of spirit which we must endure for the night, knowing that joy cometh in the morning.

Later, as she climbed up the hill of Assisi and entered the town through the ancient Porta Moiana below the gardens and bastions of Santa Chiara, a great content stole into Lesley's heart. The pain and stress of those last months in Rome, the bitterness of parting from

everything which had, up till now, made her life, died away. Seen from the perspective of this little town of holy memories everything was softened by the glamour of memory. She felt curiously old and detached, when she looked back upon the breaking up of her home. She found herself wondering that she could have *felt* so much, agonized so much, striven so much against the inevitable. She experienced the curious detachment, the selflessness, of that most deadly and introspective form of egotism—the egotism of those who yield to the influence of a religious retreat.

CHAPTER I

THE UPBRINGING OF LESLEY BRYDGES

IT was nearly a week now since Lesley Brydges had come to Assisi, a week in which, as she said to Sister Bonaventura, the dear old nun with whom she was staying at the Giglio, the Convent of the Lily, "her spirit was convalescing." Day by day she resolutely turned her back upon the difficult path which, she knew too well, lay before her. If she had been able, she would as willingly have wiped out the memory of the last few months of her life, from the tragic death of her father, crushed out of existence in the terrible motor accident which had brought the Roman Automobile Race Meeting to such an abrupt ending, to the moment when, as the train slid out of the station at Rome, she said goodbye to the familiar land-marks of her home. They had been months not only of sorrow, but months of sordid detail and bitter disappointment.

Ever since she could remember Lesley Brydges had idolized her father. Her mother died when she was still too small to recollect her, and it had been Walter Brydges's whim to bring up his little daughter to regard herself as the mistress of the beautiful home at Trinità del Monte, in which he stored the treasures they had collected together on their rambles through Europe and the Near East. When his wife, beautiful Lesley Willoughby, died of Roman fever, Walter Brydges engaged a hospital nurse to look after his child. She was a

lady, neither young nor beautiful, but charming and refined. When she was still in her early teens, a kick from a pony which had thrown her in an Irish hunting-field, whelked her prettily-arched nose; so men forgot to fall in love with her though their eyes dwelt with satisfaction on her alert, upright figure. Her mind matched it: both had the ardour and sincerity of the open air.

From Frances Bradwell, Lesley the younger learned to ride and dance and play tennis and golf, and scorn lying and insincerity generally. "Hold yourself upright," was Frances's recipe physically and morally. "Harden by exposure," was another, but by this she meant physically rather than morally.

When Lesley was eighteen, Frances Bradwell was called back to her Irish home to look after an invalid mother, and from this time onwards father and daughter lived a delightful life of semi-Bohemianism, wandering throug the byways of Europe, and keeping open house for a circle o adoring friends in the large and beautifully furnished *étage* overlooking the panorama of Rome.

Then Esme Dilke had come into their lives, Esme Dilke, with her cold, regular features, clear-cut as a cameo, and Walter Brydges, always a squire of dames, had drifted into an entanglement which, by clever manœuvring on Esme's part, had resulted in matrimony. So Lesley at twenty-two found the old order of things changed. Esme conventionalized the Brydges household, swept away its cheerful Bohemianism, replaced the old Italian servants, who had always kept house for Lesley, by stiff English maids and footmen, to make room for whom the summer pavilion in the roof-garden, dear to the memory of all the English and American visitors to Rome, who had the *entrée* to the Brydges home, was sacrificed. Open house for Lesley's friends was discouraged, while expenses were doubled on every hand.

In spite of Lesley's efforts to keep peace friction was inevitable. From the beginning the two women were antagonists. Lesley remembered too well the first time

that she saw Esme. It was Sunday and April, so all Rome had poured on to the Pincian to hear the band play. Her father's motor was drawn up on the terrace overlooking the city. Far away on her left, across the uneven roofs of the Campo Marzio, the spring sunshine shimmered on the great dome of St. Peter's, and near at hand upon her right it illuminated the dark ilexes of the Pincian, and the gay crowd in vehicles or afoot, who were listening to the band.

As often as the music struck up Lesley Brydges's eyes wandered back to the crowd to exchange recognitions with her friends. Presently two Englishmen, passing in a motor, drew up to speak to her. They were a man of forty and a man, who might have been anything from twenty to forty and probably was in the neighbourhood of thirty. Peter Webbe, the elder of the two, was in well-cut but well-worn blue serge. His fair and carefully valeted hair was growing a little thin, and he had not a few of Von Moltke's wrinkles, as well as his expression. He walked with distinction and energy, though he stooped. He had steadfast blue eyes, but the chief charm of his philosophical, clean-shaven face was the grave mouth, which could on occasion break into such a delightful smile. The grave mouth was an index to his grave politeness, to a manner which began with diffidence and melted into geniality. His friends in Rome were puzzled that he was not married, but in his shy, charming way Peter Webbe kept aloof from women. He was a bachelor by instinct. Unless women eliminated sex, while they were with him, he beat a retreat either out of the room or into the fastnesses of his own mind, a stronghold of reserve into which no one could follow him.

The other man was his antithesis. His whole manner bespoke confidence. The brim of his silk hat, the buttoning of his morning coat, the choice of his tie were exactly right. One was absorbed in the message from the ancient world transmitted through the ruins of temples and tombs: even the gods were actual to Peter Webbe: the other was one of the spoiled children of journalism.

Reginald Tirebuck had desirable chambers in Mount Street; he had a private income, more than doubled by his contributions to journalism, which were extravagantly paid and only limited by his laziness. His views upon the fashions of the hour were conclusive, and he was a shrewd enough judge of bric-à-brac and its value in pounds, shillings, and pence to set up an Art gallery in Bond Street. He was rather good at games, but not good enough to allow himself to be seen playing them. He would not stay at country houses where he was expected to hunt or shoot, but he had no objection to a week-end on the river in the summer, because he could handle a boat with finish.

He dressed very conventionally, and showed perfect taste in gauging what the exact convention was. The more his clothes cost him, the better he liked it. For the parade on the Pincian at Rome he was dressed as he would have been for the Park in London, which was unusual though perfectly correct. But he was really rather lacking in his usual self-confidence, because he had not brought his valet to Italy with him.

Peter Webbe introduced him to the Brydges', and as soon as he had the opportunity, confided to Walter in an undertone that Mr. Tirebuck was the famous "Connoisseur" of the *Carlton*, as well as the arbiter of form and fashion in the *Strand Gazette*. It seemed that the shuttle of the Fates was busy that afternoon with the skein of Lesley Brydges's life, for the letter of introduction which she carried in her dressing-case now, the first key she was to try on the threshold of her new life in London, was given to her by Reginald Tirebuck on his second visit to Rome, when he had become an habitué at their "at homes," and usually to be found by Lesley's side at functions. He admired her air of breeding, her frank, courageous type. It gave him satisfaction to be seen with such a woman.

While they were chatting and arranging to come on to the Brydges's for tea, the usual Sunday custom, one of the huge carriages behind huge high-stepping horses,

which the Italian nobility affect, went by. Lesley bowed to the occupant, a young man of almost classical beauty belonging to a princely family, which had furnished the Holy See with ten Popes. His face lit up with pleasure and he turned to say something to his companion, who looked round, gave a little stare, and then replied with a smile of assent, which reserved something.

"What a good-looking man; who is he, Miss Brydges?" exclaimed Reginald Tirebuck, surprised for the moment out of the superiority which became the arbiter of fashion and art—in the Press—when he was being introduced to English people living in the provinces. Rome was included in the provinces to him.

"That is Prince Ascanio Conti. But I don't know who the lady is. Do you, father?"

"No," said Walter Brydges absent-mindedly, still looking after the carriage of the Conti.

"I believe her name is Miss Dilke—Esme Dilke," said Tirebuck. "She was staying at Monte Carlo last winter when I was there."

Lesley could recall every minute of that afternoon. She could see once more her home at Trinità del Monte, with its delightful old furniture and bric-à-brac gleaned in years of travel through mountain cities; its roof-garden with views of the flower-sellers and artists' models on the Spanish Steps, and all the towers and domes of Rome behind; its sun-gallery looking across the valley to St. Peter's and the hills beyond the Tiber; its air of luxury and leisureliness.

To strangers the entrance at the upper end of the Via Gregoriana, the street behind the Via Sistina which looks as if it had been built to be the mews of that thoroughfare, was unpromising. The tall houses on both sides made it dark. The street was paved with clattering stones, but providentially was almost too steep for wheeled traffic. The stair, which had been mounted by so many celebrities, for most of the distinguished English and American visitors to Rome found their way sooner or

later to the Brydges' "at homes," was narrow, steep, and obscure. But when they had passed down the passage, which ran south from the front door to the sun-gallery, into which both dining-room and library opened, they never failed to be amazed at its beauty.

It was a long gallery, a dozen feet wide, which had been a *loggia*, with an arch at each end and six arches down the side. These had been filled with enormous sheets of plate-glass to turn it into a sun-gallery, and inside each arch was a gay southern awning, which was raised and lowered very easily. The gallery had a brick floor, strewn in winter with effective rugs of no great value, and it had a plentiful supply of garden lounges and tables. It needed no more; any elaboration of furniture would have clashed with its essential beauty as a *belvedere*. For the *loggia* commanded a view not often equalled; you could see Santa Maria Maggiore and the King's Palace on the Quirinal from the eastern arch, and Monte Mario and the Villa Medici and the groves of the Pincian from the western, while through the long row of arches on the south you could see the pageant of Rome—the Capitol, looking like a mighty temple; the mysterious dome of the Pantheon; the vast, shining beehive typical of the Roman Catholic religion, which crowns St. Peter's; and the Castle of Sant' Angelo, the enduring monument of the pride of the Roman Emperors, and the violence of the Middle Ages.

Scattered in between these four cardinal points a church for every day in the year reared its Lombard Tower, its pretentious dome, or its Baroque extravaganza of a steeple. Everything was held together by the friendly brown masses of tall houses, and the whole was horizoned by the long line of the Janiculum, the hill across the Tiber, from which Lars Porsena of Clusium threatened Rome.

Once more, in her mind's eye, Lesley saw herself talking, as so often happened on those Sunday afternoons, to an old friend and a new friend after her own heart—to Ken Western, with his pale face and his brilliant eyes, Ken

Western, who was known in the humble studios at the back of the Via Babuino as "the little artist of the Pincian"; and to a hard-working, ill-paid journalist, who had at last scraped together the means to spend a few months in Rome, and had brought with him a letter of introduction to Walter Brydges.

There was a ring at the bell, and Prince Ascanio came in, patrician of patricians, beautiful as a god, entirely at ease and simple, fraternizing readily with the poor journalist and the poor artist, while he got out his errand. The lady, who had been driving with him, was sitting in his mother's carriage below; might he bring her up to introduce her?

Lesley had a premonition against that woman, but it almost vanished when Don Ascanio brought her into the room. For her figure, which afterwards seemed so hard, was slight and graceful at first sight; her very particular style of dressing was effective, though it grew to seem so intolerably affected; a smile of subtle fascination made the clear-cut features almost beautiful, in spite of the thin lips, the hawk nose, the closeness of the eyes.

Don Ascanio came back, after he had introduced Miss Dilke to her host, and made a merry conversation with Lesley and the Little Artist and the journalist. He kept them in fits of laughter, but Lesley's eyes wandered. She had never seen her father—the squire of every dame—so visibly obsessed. Don Ascanio's friend had the glamour of la Belle Dame Sans Merci.

The entrance of Peter Webbe with Reginald Tirebuck did not break the spell. They were introduced to Miss Dilke, after they had shaken hands with Lesley, but there was no room for them in her conversation, though it was upon the most trivial subjects. Her father's preoccupation chilled and absorbed Lesley. At any other time she would have laughed with the gods at the eagerness with which Don Ascanio and Tirebuck cultivated each other—the Man-about-Town struck with the new type, this Roman Prince, so curiously a blend of the aristocrat and the democrat—Don Ascanio fascinated with this

walking encyclopædia of English form, and regretting that he could not have him for his valet.

Reginald Tirebuck, although he admired Miss Dilke, and knew her well by sight, refrained from any attempt to follow up the introduction. His shrewd, newspaper-man's instinct warned him that she was not a very pleasant woman, except where her heart was touched. She might make an excellent wife, if she loved a man; but he could not imagine her loving anybody so well as herself, and he felt that her impulse was to be mean and tyrannical. He wondered how Lesley diagnosed her; and having no one to talk to at the moment, went over to ask her.

"What do you think of her?" asked the astute Reginald. There was no necessity to explain to whom he refered.

"I think her eyes are too near her nose," said Lesley.

"Exactly. Well, I should give her a wide berth, if I were you."

"I should give her such a wide berth that I should never see her again, if it were left to me; but I suppose that she will pursue our acquaintance more or less, accordingly as she feels inclined."

Lesley remembered, best of all, how Peter Webbe, in his quiet, observant way, divined that all was not well with the state of Denmark, and mapped out that excursion of excursions for her which they took on the Monday—motoring out alone for a ramble round the ruins of Hadrian's Villa. Peter forgot to be himself there. He did not take a mental sieve to the latest excavations; he did not theorize about chips of marble and *pozzolana*. He dreamed with her in the spring sunshine among the violets and wild strawberries of the glades; he worshipped the beauty of the cypress spires and the white columns of the Hall of the Nymphs; he told her all that had been imagined by Italian romancists about Canopus, the Valley which the Emperor had turned into a reach of the Nile, with its temples, and houses of Mystery and Pleasure. He breathed no word of love to her, but he was her very humble servant, and devoted friend.

After that day, events moved quickly. Some-

times Lesley wondered that her father did not see the hardness of Esme's nature below the little affectations and mannerisms, with which she charmed him. Then came the respite of the summer, which Walter spent honeymooning in Switzerland. But the end was always in sight. In the bitter days which followed, it was Peter Webbe and Ken Western who were Lesley's stand-bys. Peter golfed with her, and rode with her, and planned delightful excursions in the Campagna, or loitered with her in their favourite haunts in Rome itself. Lesley garnered many memories in those months, to which she looked back when she was toiling, sore at heart, through a London August, as to some of the unspoiled and perfect days of her life—memories which were all bound up with Peter Webbe, the gentle, silent friend, who was such a tower of strength in her troubles, who anticipated her every need, and who learned at last to lift the curtain of reserve which hid his real self from the world, so that she might enter into the sanctuary of his friendship.

Ken Western used to come to see her in the evenings, when he had finished painting. He would bring his sketches round for criticism, and they smoked endless cigarettes together in the sun gallery, or on the roof-garden, while they discussed Art and Ethics, or any subjects which Ken's thoughts and the books which Lesley had been reading suggested to them. In fact, as Lesley laughingly remarked to Peter, their favourite recreation was setting the world to rights. Everyone in Rome, who knew him, loved Ken Western. He was so poor that often he would have had nothing to eat all day, if the kindly Italian woman, with whom he lodged, had not insisted on his sharing with her family the homely *minestre* or *macaroni* which formed their staple diet. He had failed to win a coveted scholarship at the school where he was being educated by a cousin of his mother's, and, when he was sixteen, had been sent into a business office in the City, where he toiled drearily for ten years, day in and day out, with never a thought in his head except his beloved painting. In the evenings he studied at the Goldsmiths'

Institute, and every spare penny went in brushes and canvases, though there were few enough pennies to spare in those days. At last the cousin died, and left a tiny legacy to him and his mother, sufficient to buy an annuity which would keep her in comparative ease for the rest of her life, and to leave a small sum over for Ken himself. That day he sent in his resignation to the office, and a month later saw him in Paris, living on nothing, studying sixteen hours every day and without a care in the world. Later he drifted to Rome, where he became acquainted with the Brydges'. He was desperately poor, but he was always courageous, always happy, always full of hope.

In the autumn Reginald Tirebuck, a bird of passage on his way to Egypt, had stopped a few days in Rome. Even his *sang-froid* was not proof against a shock at the change in the Brydges household, now that Esme was at its head. When Lesley told him of her intention of going to England, he not only applauded her spirit, but offered her genuine help, both in the way of advice and by a letter of introduction to a man who was wanting someone to help him in research work.

At first Walter Brydges had been adamant on the subject of her leaving home. For the first time father and daughter were out of sympathy with each other. But, as time went on, and relations between Lesley and her stepmother became more strained, he began to talk of giving her an allowance and letting her travel, or of setting her up in London in a flat, if he could find someone like Frances Bradwell to live with her and look after her. He was by nature a peace-lover, and he was appalled to find himself in the position of arbiter between Esme and his daughter. Esme appealed to him on every point, and sometimes his easy-going nature permitted him to give way to her, even where his sense of justice told him that she was in the wrong. Lesley began to see that her idol had feet of clay. He was no longer the gay comrade of her childhood, who had talked "big talk" to her, as they tramped the Continent together, right above her head, but none the

less uplifting. She began to realize that he was one of the men who had fallen out; that, with all his opportunities and gifts, which had made him the centre of admiration as Captain of the Eton and Oxford elevens, and with a fair amount of brains to help him to wear his honours, he had dwindled into being the spoilt child of the Anglo-American community at Rome.

For the first time in her memory bitter words passed between them. There were constant wrangles and reconciliations which, for Lesley, were followed by a numbness, a sinking of the spirits, and real physical pain in her heart. For there is physical pain, physical sickness in the hurt of an unexpected blow from someone we love. And after the first shock, no matter what reconciliations may follow, no matter what tears are shed, what protestations made, you know that deep in your heart something is broken; that never again will the power be given to that man or woman to hurt as he has wounded this time, because never again will the thrust be unexpected, not though a thousand little friendly actions have passed between, and protestations of love, even though you yourself have forgotten the hurt, and the broken plant of your love has blossomed into full flower again. For faith and trust are like a crystal bowl, which only rings true when it is flawless. That is the tragedy of it. We forget so easily, we forgive so lightly, that the action is unconscious; but, in spite of it all, when another crisis arises, and we look into our hearts, we find the memory of that smart and hurt has formed a crust of indifference which does not need much friction to grow into the terrible hardness more cruel than death, which enables us without pain to see those we have loved pass away from us. We may forget the unintentional slights, but it is only the highest love which can rise superior to the wilful breaking of trust by the loved one.

Those months during which she lived with Esme in her father's house brought many days of disillusionment to Lesley. Yet it was never of Esme that she thought, but always of her father. From the first Esme had had no

power to hurt her, for Providence has so arranged it that not only are our enemies our best friends, because they force us to develop our individuality and spur us on to achievements with the thought of their malice as an incentive, but they can never really hurt us. Do they lie about us? That is what we expect. Are they ungenerous? It would be perplexing if they were not. So all their barbs and stings are harmless, and when a shaft flies home and they achieve some definite harm for us socially or financially, we laugh, and are at once spurred to greater efforts. Truly the prayer of an ambitious man should be: "O God, take my friends away from me, if you will, but leave me my enemies!"

Then came the final tragedy out on the Campus Martius. She could see it all again; she felt as though she would never forget it. Rome had no Brooklands, so a number of the patrons of motoring improvised a course on the review-ground. And they did it carelessly—so carelessly that a well-known racing man from Paris refused to run a car over it unless better provision was taken for the safety of the onlookers. This was at the eleventh hour, when he saw that the course was merely marked off by ropes strung from light posts, and that almost in front of the grand stand it made a sharp turn like an elbow, with a short run to the winning-post. The further side was guarded by a natural bank about three yards high, and on this were massed the poor people.

Lesley remembered her father, who was developing a craze for motoring, getting up from his seat in the enclosure, and saying: "Oh, this is stupid. I'm going out into the crowd." She was tired, too, of the brainless gossip of the Italian women.

Then the race started . . . .

As her mind dwelt upon the accident, she recollected the thrill of horror with which she watched the first car swing round that corner. It had been like a premonition. As it passed the grand stand some flat object, which looked like a cushion, fell out of it and lay on the middle of the course. One of the *carabinieri*, who had been detailed to

keep back the crowd, stepped forward to pick it up. There was a chorus of voices telling him to keep back, and others bidding him hurry. The ill-fated man hesitated, stepped back, then went forward again, and, at the moment when he was actually stooping to pick up the cushion, the second car whirled round the corner.

The man at the wheel made a frantic effort to avoid the *carabiniere*. For one horrible moment he seemed to head straight towards the unprotected enclosure, where the flower of Roman Society and the King of Italy himself were sitting. The danger was too imminent; he resumed his course, and in a flash the car was upon the *carabiniere*.

Lesley remembered how the wretched man was flung by the force of impact right on to the bonnet, and carried several yards before he slipped to the ground. His body lay there, crumpled up like a figure in a marionette show, when the wire has gone slack. You could not doubt that life had gone out of him.

Lesley's eyes had been fascinated by the horrible incongruousness of that huddled body lying in the sunlight. But the next second she had responded to the gasp of dismay which went up from all round her. She saw the car waver from side to side, and then dash up the bank, where it stood poised on its back wheels for a fraction of time before it crashed heavily on to the terrified people.

The steering-gear had broken.

Even then the toll of death would not have been completed except for the presence of mind of a mounted policeman, for the horrified spectators broke across the course from either side, and the third car, hidden from sight behind the bend, was rushing towards them.

Seizing a flag from one of the flimsy posts which guarded the course, the young man galloped to meet it—only just in time, for the driver pulled up within a few yards of the distraught crowd.

Besides the unhappy *carabiniere* who had been the cause of the accident, six people were killed and some thirteen or fourteen injured. Walter Brydges was one of

them, and beyond human aid when he was carried into the deserted enclosure on an improvised stretcher.

Lesley could never get out of her mind the cruelty of Fate in ordaining that his mangled remains should be taken home over the gay Pincian in his car, the very car in which he had so often sat on a Sunday afternoon, watching the promenade of fashion while the band played.

It transpired then that Esme, for all her selfishness and extravagance, had been sincerely attached to Walter Brydges, because, when the news was brought to her, she collapsed and became as helpless as a child, so that the entire *onus* and responsibility fell upon Lesley's shoulders, which was fortunate, because the added burden of looking after Esme, who was really ill from the shock, filled up her days and left her little time to think or fret.

Only now did she begin to understand the meaning of the lines of worry that had appeared lately on her father's face ; for, when his affairs were put in order, it was found that Walter Brydges had, in his short married life with Esme, not only overdrawn his account at the Roman Bank, but had plunged heavily and disastrously on the Stock Exchange, in a futile effort to remedy matters. There was practically nothing for his widow and daughter, when his debts were paid, except the museum of treasures in the flat on Trinità del Monte. These were left unconditionally to Esme. It took the best part of a year to arrange his affairs, and thus Lesley Brydges found herself, at the age of twenty-four, faced with the necessity of earning her own living, and with no means to do it, except the fifty pounds which formed her stepmother's parting gift when she left Rome, and the vague chance of work, based on Reginald Tirebuck's letter of introduction, which had lain in her bureau since he gave it to her eighteen months before.

* * * * * *

Ah, that still beauty, that holy calm of hill and countryside below the great churches of Assisi ! Never in the arid years to come could Lesley think of this gentle oasis

in the desert of Human Endeavour without the tears springing to her eyes, and the ache of a sob to the back of her throat. Here for the asking was spread out so much beauty, beauty undreamt of by all the stricken souls toiling away in the city to which she was bound; here there was solace for everyone. How she longed to stay for ever lapped in its peace. But even while she was clutching with both hands at the passing moments, to force them to yield to her every ounce of beauty, she knew that, in a few days at the most, circumstances would drive her on to the strange new life in that unknown London to which she looked forward with a sort of terror, though not without elation. Lesley had spoken truly when she said that her spirit was convalescing. Each day that she spent in this little, silent city of Assisi, where the repose of the day is only broken by the clamorous bells of her churches, calling the people to Mass, her buoyant personality asserted itself more strongly. This is the blessed privilege of youth, in the garden of whose soul, that field-flower of the Lord which we call Hope, springs up more quickly than the tares, which are the children of the wicked one. There is no one but calls it a flower, though half the world treats hope as a weed; since in many souls, as they grow older, the gardener, seeking to keep his garden trim and worldly-wise, spends bitter hours rooting up this little plant of the Lord, lest it should mar the intricate design on which he has modelled his life, with its message of the open and illimitable fields where he might wander, if in his littleness he dared, free and unafraid.

During the months that she fretted under the restrictions which Esme put upon her, when she became mistress of the flat on Trinità del Monte, Lesley learned to think. Perhaps this was due to her close friendship with Peter Webbe, or it may be that she had stumbled on to the skirts of truth in some of her long talks with Ken Western, "the little artist," as she called him affectionately in her thoughts. She remembered the words of the wonderful George Egremont, who had been a Cabinet Minister at forty, when he drifted wit theh usual Sunday

afternoon crowd into their drawing-room, and claimed a schoolboy's friendship with her father. "But the school always expected such great things of you, old man," he had urged, "don't you sometimes get tired of the narrow life you lead here, with only such golf and hunting as you can get on the Campagna?"

"No," said Walter Brydges, "and I have even ceased to reproach myself for its narrowness. There were plenty of men more fitted than I to take up the white man's burden at home and abroad!"

"Few better," said the Right Hon. George in his brief way. And, later, when Lesley was giving him tea he had said gravely, "It grieves me to see how your father has wasted his life. He was the most brilliant of us all; we looked to him to do things in the world. But he has become one of the lotus-eaters."

"I'm afraid that in Italy we are all lotus-eaters," Lesley had said.

The great man looked at her sadly, "You too, I suppose, even with your splendid gift of youth."

"But I am a woman, and women, by nature and force of circumstance, must be lotus-eaters."

"Not to-day," he answered with a strange ring in his voice. "Do you not know what Ibsen has said—'the women are knocking on the door?' Come out into the world of action; add your power for good to the great force that is driving us onwards; use your youth—there will be time enough for this beautiful life of yours when you are old!" Something in his way of speaking, more than his words, had thrilled her. "You are not only a woman, you are an individual. Work out your individuality! Leave your notch upon the mountainside of life. It may help to stay the slipping footsteps of some other climber; and your stress will not be wasted, if the lichen of a score of years levels it out!"

Somehow his words remained in Lesley's memory, and they had been the chief incentive to her desire to leave Rome after her father's marriage. She had not thought of them before—she was too happy. For when life goes

smoothly it is an ordinary human weakness to let yourself drift with the tide. It is only when you find yourself stranded on some unexpected shallow that you come down to the bedrock of things and demand of Life, what it is that really matters.

So with Lesley Brydges. And now, in spite of the empty pain of farewell in her heart, her spirits rose at the thought of the struggle which lay before her. She spent long days walking about the silent grass-grown streets of Assisi, resting, when she was weary, now in the dim splendour of the Lower Church of St. Francis, now in the frescoed chapel of Santa Chiara, once the old parish church, where between the gaudy imitation flowers with which the altar is decked you descry a lovely fresco of the tender saint who lies buried in the vault below—the sorrowing sister of the early Franciscans, who, like the Master in whose footsteps she followed, was acquainted with grief. Consciously Lesley stored her mind with beauty. Till now she had grown to look upon it as her birthright. Others might be without it, but it had always been hers, when she chose to stretch out her hands towards it. She had drifted carelessly through the world of Beauty, taking as her due that which others were striving, and would strive, perhaps unsuccessfully, to glimpse.

So the weeks went by, and summer, a long round of perfect days, burnt itself out to the ecstatic song of the *cigalas*. Lesley still lingered in Assisi, and gentle Sister Bonaventura watched over her and prayed long prayers to Santa Chiara and the Blessed Virgin to help her in the years to come. There was a curious bond of sympathy, beyond the need of words, between the withered old nun and the girl whom she had taught years ago in the Convent School at Rome, where Lesley had undergone the little schooling which her easy-going father had considered necessary.

"It is the wish of my heart that you could stay here always," Sister Bonaventura said one night, when Leslie uttered that often repeated sigh that she must soon be going on her way. They were sitting in the window of

her bare little room in the Giglio, which overlooked the wide plain of Rivo Torto, and the great church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, sanctified by the miracles and the death of St. Francis.

"I wish it too," said Lesley. "It is so easy to be happy here; somehow one's soul expands. It seems to me that, just as our eyes are in a manner washed with colour, when we look down upon the Vale of Umbria, and see the rising folds of Perugino's hills with that strange light hanging upon them more beautiful than any artist could imagine, so are our hearts purged of all impurities in the holiness of Assisi's memories. You can understand, when you live in Assisi, how Francis, the little lover of Nature, was moved by pity to try and open the eyes of his fellow men to the kingdom of Heaven, which was lying close at hand in the valley. I suppose that, when we allow ourselves to think, we all realize the radical wrongness and weakness of our way of life. Some of us try to set things right by seeking to establish Utopia. These are the Socialists. Some betake themselves to their own lives, leaving the Beaten Track, but still by the force of their personality leading the weaker vessels. They are the Individualists. Some in a species of desperation at the hollowness of things, join the Lost Legion. Some become great lovers, or great worshippers, and others the washers of the feet of Christ upon earth. At times, a man, seeking to sink his individuality in the Common Good, becomes that paradox, a Saint, or perhaps, if he is born in the East, a God. But the motive is always Love. And here in Assisi, where the world is more beautiful than I have ever found it, it seems a simple and natural thing that Francis should have been moved by the love of Nature to try and urge his generation back to that simplicity of life, in which his spirit found contentment."

Lesley paused, and then smiled at some recollection.

"Do you remember," she said, "how in the old days of the *Sacré Cœur* I used to read Browning to you, and you told me to put the book away, saying that it troubled

you to read of love as Browning wrote of it? But it was he who said:

> "'O world, as God has made it! all is beauty;
> And knowing this is love, and love is duty,
> What further may be sought for or declared?'"

As she spoke, Lesley rose and leaned her elbows on the wide sloping ledge of the window. It was late and a full moon was riding high in the heavens. In the little vineyard below the steep convent wall was a great tree full of snowy blooms. She sensed their fragrance on the still warm air. Not far away was a stable of the milk-white oxen which plough the fields by day, just such a stable as the legend of St. Francis, which the Franciscans love to confuse with the story of Christ, gives for the birthplace of the saint. The music of the ox-bells floated up to her, hardly louder than the chant of the frogs in the convent garden. Together they filled the silence. Below and near at hand she could see the sharp silhouette of houses in the moonlight, and across the valley were Perugino's hills dark against the sky.

"I will go to-morrow," she said. "It is not good to stay here any longer. I will go, while the sun is shining and the *cigalas* sing, and I will carry the memory of all this beauty until I come again."

The beads of the old nun clicked together as she rose and joined Lesley at the window.

"Stay here," she said, "you will not find such happiness in the great cities."

"I know," said Lesley. "Yet I must go. There is the whole world before me, and my own notch to cut on the mountainside of life."

"You will be lonely."

"So was St. Clare."

"You will be poor."

"So was St. Francis."

The old nun bowed her head. "I will pray to them both to intercede for you, and to Madonna Mary to give you the greatest gift."

"The greatest gift?" repeated Lesley, wondering.

"Yes," said the old nun, with tears in her eyes. "That you may meet Love by the roadside.

"You will ask her for that?" said Lesley wistfully.

"Yes," said Sister Bonaventura, "for Madonna Mary knows the hearts of us women, what we need, and she knows that our lives are never happy or completed until we have met Love, the great Ambassador of Pain."

CHAPTER II

THE BUCKINGHAM PALACE CLUB

IN a drawing-room of the Buckingham Palace Club Lesley was talking to two other girls, who had rooms there. For rooms, with breakfast, dinner and attendance included, they were charged from twenty-one shillings per week upwards, and few of the inmates of the four houses in the Buckingham Palace Road, which were thrown together to form a Residential Club for Working Women, paid the *upwards*. So, except in one house, the rooms which were too large for twenty-one shillings' worths were partitioned off.

Lesley had been in London for a week, waiting to enlist in the great army of women who earn their own living. The letter of introduction, which Reginald Tirebuck had given her in Rome many months before, had borne fruit a few days ago in the form of an epistle from a friend of his friend asking her to call upon him. It was from this appointment that she was returning to the Club about seven o'clock in the evening. She was going upstairs to her room, feeling, as she always did in those early days, a stranger, because her affairs were of no consequence to anyone in that caravanserai of working women, when, as she passed the open door of the drawing-room, someone called out to her, " Hullo, Lesley, what luck ? "

Lesley's face brightened. From the beginning her heart had warmed towards the kind, impulsive girl who had

just spoken to her with the easy familiarity of an old friend.

Agnes Openshaw drifted into calling people by their Christian names quickly. She had just come in from business, and had taken off her gloves and veil, which lay on the table beside her with several small parcels and a prodigious handbag, while she smoked a cigarette. She waved her case to Lesley, as she came into the room, with the wide magnetic smile, which made people forget that she was not strictly beautiful. Agnes Openshaw was a girl who, you felt instinctively, could never do a mean or small-spirited action. If she failed in loyalty or trust to anyone it would be through the carelessness of one who was too big to think of details which never entered into her own philosophy of life. She was tall, with a figure whose perfect poise made both men and women turn to look at her as she passed, more frequently than a merely pretty face would have done. But her chief attraction lay in her vitality and magnetism, in the splendid *joie-de-vivre* which emanated from her. She had dark brown eyes with curious shadows in them when she was serious, which was seldom, and a slow smile which drew you to her even against your will.

In reply to her "Well, Lesley, what luck?" the newcomer said, "I suppose I ought to call it very good luck. I am to have two pounds a week; the hours are from ten to five, and, as far as I can make out, the work is likely to go on for ever."

"Then you have got the job? Tell us all about it; it sounds too good to be true."

"This Major Waugh to whom I went is a well-off crank who considers it his mission to write a history of Australia in the Early Days. He went there a long time ago and made his fortune, and feels that he has a proprietary right in the whole Continent. He lives in a house in Notting Hill full of relics and newspaper cuttings; the relics as well as the cuttings are about Australia—he particularly pointed out an ornithorhynchus shot by Captain Cook, the first miners' cradle used in the Victorian gold-

fields, and that kind of thing, and a whole library full of albums."

"Well, if you have to spell words like the bird that Captain Cook shot, I'm glad it's you and not me who has been engaged, stoney-broke as I am! What is Major Waugh like himself?"

"Pathetic. He clings to his youth though I think he must be over seventy. He dyes his hair and, so as not to show any baldness, has let it grow very long on the left side and plasters this over the crown with soap or pomade. His moustache is dyed too, and waxed into horns, and he is so stiff that he can hardly walk. But he still puts on spats and shepherd's plaid trousers, and stumps up and down Regent Street at shopping hours."

"Is he nice?"

"No. I don't think you could call him nice. He holds his head down and looks at you from the tops of his eyes, and barks questions at you one after the other without waiting to hear your answers."

"That doesn't sound very promising. Shall you have to work with him?"

"No. He has engaged me to copy out all the records and manuscripts relating to Australia, between the years 1788 and 1888, which are preserved in the Colonial Office."

"Heavens, how dull!" cried the volatile Agnes.

"I don't think it will be at all uninteresting work," said the other girl, who had not yet spoken.

In spite of the firm friendship between Agnes Openshaw and Mary Strange, it would have been difficult to find types more dissimilar. Mary was very shabbily dressed, and her figure, which was of medium height, drooped slightly, not with the lean-chested droop of the student of books, but with that grace pregnant of womanhood with which the sculptors of ancient Greece loved to invest the female form. Perhaps it was the way in which the little head was set on the shoulders, the column of the neck smooth and full, sloping forwards, which always put Lesley in mind of some Tanagra figures that used to stand upon her father's study mantelpiece, a treasure-trove from

their April in Athens. She was slow of speech where Agnes was quick, gentle where Agnes was vital. The presence of Agnes might renew in you physical courage if you were tired, stimulate your intelligence, sharpen your wit; it was spiritual strength which you would draw from Mary. Both girls were intensely sympathetic and sensitive to their surroundings, but, while Agnes tempered her sympathy with her intellect, Mary's was from the heart only.

"I don't think it will be at all uninteresting. You will feel that you are doing work which somebody has to do some day. Because they ought to have copies of these records in one of the Public Libraries in Australia."

Agnes shrugged her shoulders. "I'd rather be stewardess on a Channel steamer."

"Don't listen to her, Miss Brydges, she's too frivolous. Personally I think you're uncommonly lucky to get such well-paid work to start with." Mary spoke with a sore heart. She was so often out of work that it was with the greatest difficulty that she could afford to live at the Club.

"Have you been to the Colonial Office yet?" asked Agnes.

"Yes, Major Waugh took me there this morning. I thought we should never arrive; he wouldn't take a taxi, he talked for nearly half an hour, I should think, about the un-necessity of it; and he's awfully slow about catching trains and getting in and out of 'buses, and, when we did get there, we had quite a little way to walk. But, to cut a long story short, at last we found ourselves in the library, and I admired the wisdom of the Librarian."

"Why?"

"He doesn't see you himself, nor do any of his assistants, if they can help it. Porters in uniform, who like attending to bores so as to earn tips, come and look at your order, and, if it is all right, they get up any books you require—a hundred at a time if necessary. One thing was very funny; they made the Major sign a guarantee that he would be responsible for any damage I did as a suffragette. And I don't think that he was at all sure of me; but as he

wanted me to begin work there and then, he signed it, and I took off my gloves, and waited for the books."

"Did you have long to wait?"

"Half an hour or an hour."

"And did he wait with you?"

"Of course; but fortunately you're not allowed to talk, except to the attendants. So I adopted their suggestion that I should glance through the catalogues which were laid out on a bench at the other side of the room, while Major Waugh went to sleep and annoyed the whole room with his snoring."

"Weren't you ashamed of him?"

"No, I didn't care; several people were snoring gently, with their pens in their hands."

"How did you wake him?"

"The attendant woke him—he seemed used to it—when he brought the records. He brought them in on a truck, like they have at a railway-station—twenty volumes to start with. These took me down to 1800. I believe I'm to copy out everything that is in them."

"Did you begin at once?"

"Yes. Major Waugh undid the brown paper parcel which he had been carrying, and took out the particular kind of note book in which he has his copying done. He has not realized typewriting yet. He has even a particular kind of fountain pen, which he likes it done with, and which he proceeded to lend me."

"What was it all about?"

"Reports from settlers about convict servants mostly."

"It's rather different from going to the Colonies now," said Mary.

The Colonies were never out of her thoughts. She read every word about the prospects for emigrants upon which she could lay her hands. She was only waiting till she found the courage to take the plunge. She did not care if she became a servant or a farm-labourer, or what. She was so desperately anxious to be somewhere where she felt she was wanted.

They neither of them answered her. They had never

thought about the Colonies. There was silence till they heard a ring at the bell, succeeded by footsteps on the stairs, and Luigi, the cheap manservant, who opened the hall-door and always looked as if he had just dropped a table-napkin behind it, came in with a card on a tray.

> MR. REGINALD TIREBUCK,
> 200, Mount Street,
> Mayfair.
> St. James's Club.

"Show the gentleman up, please."

"That's rather curious," said Lesley, when Luigi went out of the room, "it's the very man who gave me the letter of introduction to the friend of Major Waugh."

"What, Reginald Tirebuck of *The Carlton?*"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, I must fly," said Agnes, gathering up her numerous small parcels. "I'm dancing at 'Prince's' to-night. Come along, Mary, and talk to me while I dress."

"You are going with that everlasting Dolly Illington, I suppose?" said Mary, as she prepared to follow.

Agnes shrugged her shoulders. "Of course."

"Don't you ever grow tired of him?"

"No. He is the rich young man without whom it is more difficult for me to enter into my Kingdom of Heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle," rejoined Agnes flippantly, uttering in a jest words which had more behind them than Mary could conceive.

Reginald came in looking the very glass of fashion from his miraculous white waistcoat to his shining Oxford shoes. He explained that he had called earlier in the day, and not found her in, and that he was on his way to a dinner-party at the Japanese Embassy.

"Whatever made you come to a boarding-house, Miss

Brydges?" he asked in a shocked voice, after he had heard about her interview with Major Waugh.

"Reduced circumstances," laughed Lesley; "besides, it calls itself a club."

"I beg its pardon, and yours."

"Don't apologize. Of course I would rather have had a place of my own, but I find this very convenient. Later on, I may take a small flat, if business prospers!"

"But how did you hear about this—club?"

"From Peter Webbe. He wrote to his sister, Lady Rusbridge, to ask her where I could stay, as I knew nothing about London. She happens to be one of the Committee who decide whether a woman is eligible or not for residence in this Club, and she advised me to come here."

"I see," said Tirebuck. "I've come to ask you to dine in my flat, on the twenty-sixth, and go on to the Three Arts Ball. My aunt will chaperon you."

"It's very good of you," said Lesley. In her heart she would have liked to refuse because, though she loved dancing, she did not fancy that Reginald would be a very sympathetic partner. But she felt that it would be churlish after his kindness in giving her the letter of introduction which had led to her engagement by Major Waugh. Also she was grateful to him because she recognized that it was an effort on his part to introduce her to a new circle of friends. She meekly accepted, and on the night of the dance, three weeks later, found herself, as the clock struck eight, in his perfectly-appointed flat. They should have dined half an hour earlier to be in time for the dance, but that appeared to him of much less importance than dining at the canonized hour.

They were waited on by a manservant, and the dinner was as recherché as the bric-à-brac for which Tirebuck was noted. His aunt was a negative person with well-bred prejudices reflected in her appearance. Knowing that Lesley Brydges was working in London she would not have countenanced her nephew entertaining her in Mount Street, if he had not insisted that her grandfather had been a Master of Foxhounds.

"Well, how do you like your profession ?" he asked.

"My work ? Oh, I find it quite interesting. At first the hours seemed rather long, though they are really short for working hours ; but I have settled down to them now. Yet I still feel as if I were in a cage, especially when the sun is shining outside, and all London is calling !"

"Yes, it must have been difficult at first to settle down to work on which you have to concentrate. I suppose you miss your old life very much, Miss Brydges ?"

"Sometimes. I miss the freedom, the rides over the Campagna, the golf, and all the other pleasures of outdoor life. One day, when the sunshine made bright patches on the polished floor, and the wind carried the sound of a bugle-call from somewhere in the Mall, I fell to wondering what it would be like to have to work there all day, when the riotous spring sun was shining, and there were flowers in the Park—one does long to be out of doors then ! And I felt a little afraid, rather as if I was one of the unwise Virgins, who forgot to replenish their lamps with oil ! Not that it is my own fault, because, as the women tell me at the Club, the only oil which lights the wise Virgin of to-day to success is a business education, and that, of course, was my parents' affair !

"But I find much to interest me. I study the types of people who come to the library to work, and my authors, the people whose correspondence fills the records, are naïve. At present I am engaged upon the reports of the settlers about their ticket-of-leave servants : these are very human documents. The books I have to work at are great, dusty, red-leather volumes, all rubbed at the edges, which cover my clothes with red powder, and the handwriting on the yellowed pages is cramped and faded. Poor, dead and unremembered clerks ! Their misspelt and often ungrammatical documents are all the more pathetic for the elaborate and curly capitals with which they toiled to adorn them. It is like living in the midst of a ghostly company to transcribe those books ! They help one to forget the outer world of wind and sunlight. The ghosts

of the writers rise up before me, and I weave romances about them. And not *their* ghosts only, but the ghosts of the people whom they wrote about; for I have brought to light many long-forgotten scandals and grievances of a hundred years ago."

"Why, Miss Brydges!" laughed Tirebuck, "I should never have suspected you of being a sentimentalist!"

"I'm not," said Lesley, joining in the laugh against herself. "But just now, while everything is fresh, I've a lot of enthusiasms to work off!"

"Will you take up this profession permanently?" asked the Aunt.

"I don't know," said Lesley. "I shouldn't like to spend the rest of my days just copying out records; but I'm rather untrained for anything else."

"I suppose you wouldn't call marrying and having children a profession?" said the Aunt, with some asperity. She did not approve of girls, who were as attractive as Lesley, earning their own living, because she considered that they were less dangerous to young men, like her nephew, when they were safely married.

"Well, no," answered Lesley. "I suppose it is a profession with some people; but I prefer to think of it as a natural state, the sort of thing that happens to ordinary healthy people, just like measles and vaccination." She glanced at Tirebuck for support, but he was looking frank disapproval into a glass of sherry.

"Rather plain speaking, Miss Brydges," said the Aunt in a tone of reproof.

"Oh, I'm all for sincerity," said Lesley.

"No," cried Tirebuck, with mock horror, wrinkling his face in whimsical disgust. Knowing his worthy relative's prejudices he wished to create a diversion. "Not sincerity! That is one of the evils I do pray to be delivered from! Sincerity! My dear Miss Brydges, can you, a woman, honestly urge sincerity on the world? Oh, no! Sincerity to me is a flat-footed virtue, the last of all with whom I wish to dance in this world of care. Give me instead, jovial deceit a-tiptoe for temptation,

with cloven hoofs encased in spats and patent leather, and tail tucked out of sight, tilting the scales which Truth, poor dear, attempts to hold before the world with blindfold eyes!"

His aunt thought he had taken leave of his senses, but he achieved his end.

When they had enjoyed every comfort, they slipped into the Burnooses which were to conceal their ordinary evening dress, and a taxi was called, and they drove to the Albert Hall. It was Lesley's first experience of a great Fancy Dress Ball in London, and she was delighted to find herself back in Carnival-Land, which held so many memories for her of Nice and Rome and Naples. But Reginald had not the enthusiasm which tunes one to concert-pitch in a whirl of music and laughter; he danced sufficiently well, but he did not care for it, and he was a hypochondriac with qualms about overdoing himself. So he had a round or two with her each dance, and then sat down with her and his aunt, and criticized, until his eye fell upon Mark Aylmer.

Aylmer was a man whom he did not like much, because he was secretly envious of him. He lived at The Manor House, Brook Green, and said that he had bought it for its name. Reginald despised him for living at Brook Green, but envied him for feeling sufficiently sure of himself to do it. He belonged to an old county family, and, like Walter Brydges, had been a shining light in the Eton Eleven, and some of the most important people in the country were still his friends as they had been at Eton. But ever since he had married beautiful Marian Hesketh, the artist, he had neglected the society into which he was born, for the far more interesting society of Literature, Art, and the Drama.

You would have said that Mark Aylmer was a hunting-man, though he had seldom been astride a horse since he left Oxford. He had a slim upright figure and a very trim white moustache which matched the well-cut features of a face that kept its tan summer and winter.

Like most artists, his wife seldom went out to parties except in the evening; but, since she painted open-air

subjects as well as portraits, she lived rather an out-of-door life. Marian Aylmer was a wonderful woman. Her husband, it is true, was prematurely white, but she looked young enough to be his daughter, with her youthful figure, rounded face, and merry eyes. She dressed charmingly in her own distinctive fashion. To-night she was masquerading as a Belle of 1830, with pink flounces like the petals of a rose. You could not call her exactly pretty; but there was an engagingness in her face which was better than prettiness; she was always one of the most charming-looking people in a room.

Mark and she never danced together at a ball, unless they were both wallflowers and the music was irresistible. But if she caught his glance she signalized the event by some wifely grace. Lesley's critical eye told her that Mark, though he danced with verve, did not come up to her standard; but at this moment, after an evening spent in Reginald's illustrious company, in which he had talked conventionalities, wasted an hour or two of the dance by coming late and the rest of it by getting tired at the end of a few steps, she felt the need of a more robust personality, and yielded to being spun through not one but several dances.

Reginald had just been telling her about the Aylmers' at-homes, and this in sneers; but Mark did not look like Reginald's definition: "a man who spends his life in offering tea to small celebrities." She asked him, in her direct way, how he came to be so sunburnt.

"Golf."

"Do you play much?"

"A fair amount, but I'm not any good." To a man who had "kept wicket for 'the Gentlemen,'" it seemed that people did not begin to play golf till they had got down to scratch, so he did not pursue the subject.

"Do you play any other games, then?" She felt sure that she was talking to a sports man.

"No. I used to play cricket."

"My father was a cricketer," said Lesley proudly. "He was Captain of the Eton and Oxford Elevens."

"God bless my soul!—are you a daughter of the great Walter Brydges—Buck Brydges, who gave me my cap at Eton—the greatest late-cutter that ever walked out of the pavilion at Lord's?"

She nodded.

"Shake hands with me, Miss Brydges, and count me your friend for ever."

He had seen the announcement of Walter's death in the papers, but he did not like to allude to it. He started a flow of reminiscences; then suddenly checked himself, seeing that the names meant nothing to her. Walter Brydges had never talked cricket to Lesley; he had been absorbed in his new environment.

To make conversation Mark began to tell her who the celebrities in the room were. And he had plenty to say on various subjects: they were not deep subjects, but he spoke with humour and knowledge.

When they had had two or three dances together, and were beginning another, he caught his wife's eye and signalled to her to stop and speak to him as she came round. "I want to introduce Miss Brydges to you, dear; she's the daughter of one of my dearest friends and a stranger in London."

The wording of the introduction pleased Lesley. He had said the useful thing. She came afterwards to know that Mark Aylmer often did say the useful thing: that was his function in the world.

Mrs. Aylmer introduced her partner: "Captain Rashleigh, Miss Brydges," and said, "We must all have supper together."

"I'm afraid I can't," said Lesley. "I am here with the Tirebucks."

"Well then, come and sit down with me while the men go out and smoke a cigarette," she said. "I've hardly rested a minute since I came into the room, and I'm not so young as I was."

Lesley thought she looked younger than herself, in her delicious rose-pink furbelows, but they found two comfortable chairs in the passage, and settled themselves down.

"Mark says that you're a stranger in London," began his wife. "What are you doing here?"

"Working for my living."

"That's what I do every day, as long as the daylight lasts."

Lesley did not know that it was work which brought fame and wealth, so she felt encouraged to talk about her own life.

"It sounds terribly dull, but stick to it: work as regular and well-paid as that is not easy to get if you have had no training; and if you leave the Library at five o'clock, you can have plenty of fun afterwards."

"How?"

"Go about and see people. No, don't say that you don't know any. There are plenty who would welcome such an addition to their parties as yourself."

"Should I be an addition?"

"Of course! The whole secret of giving parties is to ask the pretty people to meet the clever ones."

Lesley said nothing, but she was pleased.

"Come to our next Monday night. We always have Mondays: the week-end people are still out of town; and it is nice to be without their babble of Bridge and Sandown."

"Where do you live?"

A card-case was produced from the wonderful old Italian bead-bag which Lesley had been coveting. It was not a proper card-case, but a little ivory box, carved by Byzantine hands for some Lombard princess a thousand years ago. Lesley almost gasped; she knew something about Italian curios. The card read:

MRS. MARK AYLMER,
The Manor House,
Brook Green, W.

"We have to live out there," said Mrs. Aylmer, "to get the house we want within our means. We like it very much; the Roman Catholic Church buildings opposite are like mediæval alms-houses."

"What time shall I come?" asked Lesley.

"Well, we receive any time between nine at night and three or four in the morning. But come at nine, so that you may have a proper talk with a few people before it becomes Babel."

Mark Aylmer and Captain Rashleigh had returned.

"Yes, Francis," she said to the soldier, laying a hand on his arm in pleasant intimacy. "You shall have an extra instead of the dance I have stolen! I love dancing with you too much to give it up for any girl!"

Her husband laughed his approval.

"She's always perfectly open about her 'affairs,'" he said to Lesley, with his eyes dwelling on his wife affectionately.

Lesley did not grasp that he was speaking literally. Marian Aylmer was one of those women who always have lovers, several at the same time, and allow them much latitude, down to a point where jealousy might have something to say, though the Ten Commandments remain silent. But this did not prevent her from being the happiest of wives, adoring and adored by her manly husband. She made short work of a lover who went further than her code allowed.

As she was going away hanging on Captain Rashleigh's arm, he called after them, "Don't let her tire herself out, Francis; she has an important sitter to-morrow.

"My wife has only one fault," he said to Lesley. "She's so deuced fond of burning the candle at both ends."

"I should despise her if she wasn't."

"Now, I suppose you would. It seems to be a characteristic of the sort of woman I *respect*."

Lesley was afraid that he was going to say *admire* and was grateful to him for the sudden inversion.

Tirebuck's supper-table was close to the Aylmers', where Mrs. Aylmer sat between her husband and Captain

Rashleigh shedding graces to them both as if she had been an actress of twenty-five. Reginald and his aunt talked about her in the most demolishing way; he really liked her very much, but Mark Aylmer had too strong a position to be attacked except through his wife, and Reginald hated Mark Aylmer because he refused to be bound by the code which he had evolved, and retained the admiration of the young man about town, in spite of it.

CHAPTER III

FACING FACTS

"The Buckingham Palace Club,
"Buckingham Palace Road, S.W.
"December 6th, 19—.

"DEAR PETER,

"I am here in London settled in the club your sister recommended, and hard at work in the Colonial Office reading through old documents for the Major Waugh that Reginald Tirebuck's friend introduced me to. For this I receive the splendid and munificent salary of two pounds a week! Two pounds a week! Oh, it is very droll. So you see it has not been so difficult, but was the path of danger ever difficult to tread at the outset? Has it not flowers there always? Is there not always the hint of greater treasure beyond to lure us on? Do not we always see as in a mirage, a vision of the others who have gone before to show us the way?

"The strange thing is that I am happy, really happy! It seems to me now that I have put behind me the beautiful leisurely life which has been mine since childhood, I am beginning to live. I sometimes wonder how I was content to dream the years away in Rome with half my faculties asleep, when here humanity is stretched out in endeavour. When I was walking in Kensington Gardens the other day, I came unexpectedly upon the statue of Energy,

reining his horse with one hand, while with the other he shades his eyes to gaze into Futurity. You must have noticed it often when you were in London, though I have never seen it before because it was not here, or at least, I have no recollection of it, in my childish days. To me it was an inspiration; the splendid vitality of the pose of man and beast, all animation, vigour, and fire of eagerness, quickened my pulses. In some lesser way, that is how I feel about my new life here in this city of working men and women. London calls to me in these days, London, that great machine without heart or soul, whose fires are fed with human beings, whose insatiable valves and pistons suck in humanity morning after morning to squeeze the brain and heart of it into its distillery for the manufacture of gold, and then expel it exhausted night after night! She is such a city of men and women, this great London, so different from my beloved little cities of the Valley of Spoleto, so different even from Rome.

"When I think of you now, Peter, I think of you as living in a world of dreams. Here am I awake, with my feet on the earth, in a desert of human endeavour, pressing forward with all the other men and women of my generation. But you are still asleep, one of the lotus-eaters, living in a city of memories, feeding upon them, ordering your life in a round of beauty, with your eyes on the hilltops, your feet in flowers! Well, there is mud on my shoes, but there is mud on the shoes of all the others, men and women, who come down into the cities to work, and I am proud to be of them. To me it is a never-ceasing joy, when I have finished my work in that great orderly library of the Colonial Office, to walk along the lower end of St. James's Park in the dusk, with the pavement, so often wet, reflecting the lamplight, keeping pace with all the other workers returning from their toil, right through the park, past the barracks where the soldiers are sometimes still drilling, to the Buckingham Palace Road and the gay shops, and so to Victoria and the Club! There is a sense of camaraderie in it, which warms the

heart and takes away all the loneliness which otherwise I should feel.

"After all, I do not miss the old life as I thought I should. Sometimes my heart has hungered for the fields of Rome; for the sunshine making cloud shadows of the giant stone-pines in the Borghese; for the miraculous web of almond blossom which will soon be veiling the slopes of the Aventine; for the roses which I begin to fear I shall never see again glowing round the shrine of Apollo in the gardens of the Pincian. But these things belong to the world of dreams, which I left behind me when I turned my back upon Assisi, and was carried by the roaring train out of the enchanted Valley of Spoleto. Here life is so much more vital than it has ever been before. I am thrilled at the thought of my independence, at my liberty to turn my hand to whatever I choose to do. I am I, myself, alone, free to work as I will on the plastic clay of my life, more like a man than a woman in my freedom from restraint. I can even find it in my heart to pity the lovers walking arm in arm along the Embankment at night, scorning their raptures with an intuitive knowledge of the half-painful bondage in which they are bound by the law of Physiology.

"Meanwhile, I am not lonely. The Club, in which I lodge, is full of working women; their occupations, their mode of living, their thoughts, their pleasures are the open pages of a new book to anyone like myself, who has been dead all this while to the greater part of life. With them I go to theatres, and concerts, to the Cathedrals, to lectures by people like Annie Besant, to séances, to meetings of the Higher Thought. You are laughing to yourself, Peter, and asking what I am doing *dans cette galère?* But I can assure you that nothing comes amiss to me in these days, and on every side I see fresh avenues of thought and work and pleasure opening before me.

"Yes, I am happy, curiously happy, and so engrossed in my new life that when Reginald Tirebuck took me to a dance, as he did last night, I found myself unexpectedly out of touch both with him and the old world in which I

suppose I used to live. Don't worry, I shall find my level one day. But at the present moment, my mind like a young colt let out to pasture, nibbling with avidity at all the indigestible herbs beloved of the young. I am New Woman, Free-Thinker, Socialist, Suffragette all in one. I veer towards each wind that blows upon me, delighted to find in it another point of view for a mind which has been singularly uninformed upon such vital matters! I fear my metaphors are badly mixed, and I am sure that you are shaking your head over them, so I must end. Please give my love to Rome, and lay some roses for me on the Altar of the Unknown God.

"Your friend,

"LESLEY BRYDGES."

Outside the cold, cheerless rain whipped the windows. Having sealed and addressed her letter, Lesley rested her arms on the writing-table and took in the unpromising aspect of the day. It was a Saturday, and as the Colonial Office was only open until one o'clock, and she was very tired after her late night, she had decided to work on her manuscripts at home. It was twelve o'clock now and she had not touched them yet because she had been writing this long-defered letter to Peter Webbe. Now that it was finished, she felt suddenly depressed. The drawing-room was supposed to be heated by hot water radiators, but the furnace had been allowed to burn low and the atmosphere was chill: she shivered a little as she glanced from the dismal view of grey skies and streaming panes to the empty grate: she wished that she could light a great fire which would crackle and blaze.

The house was very still because all the inmates were away at their work. Lesley's eye wandered round the large conventionally furnished room; it was pleasant enough with its light walls and its French brocades, its engravings, its spindle-legged tables and its cosy chairs, but it did not contain one object on which her eye could rest with any appreciation. She thought of the drawing-room of her father's flat in Rome. In American fashion

it had been called the library ; the name was appropriate, because Walter Brydges had an excellent library of English, French and Italian books about Italy : it had been his hobby to collect them. The walls were closely hung with choice bits of the less-known fifteenth century painters, like Mezzastris, gathered in pilgrimages through Umbria, and the chimney-piece, tables, and tops of the book-cases were littered with lovely little objects of metal and marble and majolica collected in old towns from Normandy to Naples.

Somehow the memory of that room, and all that it had stood for in her life, added to the growing cloud of depression. Up till now she had not realized to the full what it would mean to close the doors upon Italy and her gracious idleness. Now she looked forward, and for the first time she found that the great content of independence had a tarnish on its shining surface. In Assisi she had felt *nostalgia*. Every mile of the journey from Rome had been a wrench, from the moment that the train slipped out of the great noisy station to those last hours in Milan when she had stood, late at night, on her balcony looking down into the Cathedral square, where the clanging electric trams circled in the yellow glare of their lights below the Gothic pinnacles of the *Duomo*. Thinking back now, she realized how much Peter Webbe had been bound up with her thoughts as she gazed farewell at each familiar landmark. When Rome faded away, when the great saints of the Lateran were no longer figured against the blue sky, and the pines of the Janiculum were folded in the hills ; when at last St. Peter's dome was wrenched from her sight by a turn in the line, it had been of him that she thought. And even more when the Campagna unfolded itself, revealing in green hollows the *loggia'd* farms, dear to the hearts of them both, she recalled the many happy hours they had spent together in the fields of Rome. The tall groves of eucalyptus trees with their leaves silvered in the breeze reminded her of a day they spent together going to the Trappist monastery on the old road to Ostia. There

were sheets of asphodels in bloom on either side of the railway: they carried memories too.

"I believe I am lonely," said Lesley, fingering her letter. Deep in her heart she felt a sort of fear. Some words of Agnes Openshaw's came into her mind. Agnes's life after working hours was a round of feverish gaiety. One morning Lesley had gone into her room before she went off to work, and found her already dressed and cleaning her satin slippers with benzine, looking fresh though she had heard her come in after 4 a.m.

"How do you keep it up? Don't you get awfully tired?" she exclaimed.

"Tired?" repeated Agnes, with a mocking little laugh. "Tired? Of course I'm tired! I shall want to fall asleep over my work a dozen times to-day. My dear, when you have been on the treadmill for seven years, and when you are as old as I am—twenty-nine hélas!—you will be glad to be so tired, that you can't think!"

"But I want to think," protested Lesley.

"That's because you're young, and because you haven't yet looked down the years to see what they are likely to bring you. I was the same when I was twenty-four, just as full of enthusiasms, just as interested in my fellow-workers and all about them, just as keen for independence. It's only because you haven't exhausted your animal spirits. Keep them as long as you can, but don't put too much store by them, because one of these fine days you'll wake up and find them gone, and that will be your first glimpse of the particular Hades to which most working women consign themselves. No, thank you, I would rather have corns on my feet from over-dancing than an ache in my heart from over-thinking!"

What if, after all, this confidence in herself, this zest for a life of work and independence were only animal spirits!

From the first she had been oppressed by the lack of joy in the lives of the women she met. Not all her imagination, which made her invest every aspect of her new life with romance, prevented her from feeling the depressing

atmosphere of the club of women workers in which she was lodging. Though cheerfulness was the note of the day, an almost aggressive cheerfulness, she was conscious of a maze of tragedy to which she had no clue. Sometimes it seemed to her as though these women had no souls, these women of all ages, young and old, who gathered together at breakfast in the morning and then scattered each to her work, to meet again at night round the humdrum board, and chatter glibly of the little doings of the day. Lesley found herself wondering what their real selves were like when they shut the doors upon their small world at night, and faced the hours alone. She had an uncomfortable sensation that there was tragedy behind many of those closed doors. And yet, they were all more or less successful, to the outward eye at any rate, in their way of life. Did they sometimes weep, she wondered, were they lonely? Did they want homes of their own?

For the moment a sort of panic took possession of her. She thought of the faces of the other women, brave faces some of them, and was afraid. What should she do if the same fate overtook her, if she was doomed to live on here always and always, with nothing in front of her except to die eventually, and be buried and forgotten?

She recollected some words of Agnes's in that same conversation. Agnes had asked her if she had ever been up to the room of a certain little old lady called Emmeline Pryce.

When Lesley said 'no,' Agnes had taken up the parable. "She does the whole work of it herself, and, in spite of its poorness and its smallness, it is just as clean as a new pin. You know that she spends nearly all her time there, and often has her meals upstairs. She won't let any of the maids go inside it. And what do you think she said to me one day when I was having tea with her? 'This is the only home I have, Miss Openshaw, the only home I ever shall have. All my life, ever since I was a girl and my father died, I have had to work, and there has

never been a time when I was able to save enough to have a real home of my own. Now I am too old to work, nobody wants old women, you know, though I am still as capable of earning a wage as some of you younger ones. When I looked through my savings I found that I had enough to purchase a small annuity. By economy I can afford to live here. But, oh, my dear child, it was a bitter moment, when I realized that after all my years of work I still could not have that tiny house and garden, no matter how small, which had always been my lodestar. I am not afraid that you will laugh at an old woman's fancy, so I tell you how I pretend that this little room is my house. It is my pride and pleasure to work in it, and keep it as I would have kept my own home. And now, perhaps this is a consolation of old age, I am quite happy. See, I even have my garden!' And she drew me to the window to show me some stocks and gilly-flowers that were on the sill. Oh, Lesley, it was pitiful! Think of the poor old thing hungering all those years for her own wee house, and making shift with that room a few feet square and some pots of flowers in the window!"

At the time, though Lesley had been moved by Agnes's words, the whole meaning had not come home to her. But now she seemed to see something of the machinery of the treadmill which had caught Emmeline Pryce, and all those other dreary-faced women, in its toils; and she understood for the first time why Agnes shrank from it. What if after all . . . ?

"Well, how went the dance?" asked Mary Strange. Lesley had been so absorbed in her thoughts that she had not heard the door open.

"Oh, Mary, I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "Do come and exorcise my evil spirits!"

"Evil spirits! There can't be any evil spirits to exorcise for you! I suppose you had a glorious time last night, and danced till morning, with the result that you are just tired out and feeling the reaction. Isn't that so?"

"Perhaps," admitted Lesley. "Only somehow—well,

I had just been writing to a friend in Italy, and telling him how splendid and full of interest I found the life here in London, where we are all working together, units in the great forward movement of humanity, when suddenly I felt an awful sinking of the heart, and it seemed as though the earth, which I had thought firm below my feet, was shifting like the desert sand."

"I know," said Mary. "It's the old story of 'Just when we are safest'—you remember the passage in 'Bishop Bloughram's Apology'? But don't make yourself unhappy. You know there's really very little for you to worry about. Go to sleep after lunch, and have a good rest. You're tired out now, but you'll wake up feeling confident about things again."

Mary was just the same unselfish sympathizer as ever, but something in her voice, a certain dreariness behind the gentle tone of encouragement, made Lesley glance at her keenly.

"How tired you look!" she said. "What have you been doing?"

"I *am* tired. I went out at nine this morning on my everlasting task of looking for work, and I have only just come in."

"Oh, Mary, in this awful rain, too! Did you have any luck?"

"Not very much, but one or two people took my name and address, and promised to let me know definitely on Monday."

"What a brute I am to come wailing to you for sympathy for my wretched little imaginary woes, when you are really in trouble! Do forgive me, Mary, dear!"

"Oh, well, imaginary woes are often worse than real ones, and anyway it is always worth while trying to set them right because they can be comforted, whereas the others are a hopeless task; there is no cure for real sickness of the soul."

"I wish I could help in some way. It seems awful to me that you should have such bad luck; everything you touch goes wrong!"

"It's lack of training, not bad luck, which dogs my footsteps. There's no room on the market for women who are not properly trained. And rightly too, I suppose; it's only when you happen to be one of them that it seems hard lines. It isn't as if I funked either hard work or responsibility. Life at the hospital taught me the meaning of them: it's just that people won't take a woman without experience and give her a living wage, except in one or two lines which are already hopelessly overcrowded, however willing she may be to learn and work, yes, and capable too."

"What were you doing to-day, answering advertisements or seeing agents?"

"Agents, principally. Since that massage business, which was the only good post I ever had, went smash, I have been trying to get more work of the same sort. I've given it up as hopeless now, and have my name down at several agents' for day-work as nursery governess. You'd think I should be able to get that, wouldn't you, in this great city of houses? I have two excellent references, and the fact that I was three years in hospital before my health gave out ought to assure the parents that I am capable of looking after sick or delicate children, and I am of an age to fill a responsible post. But I can hear of nothing, nothing that is to say in the way of day-work. One of the agents did tell me of a post in South Wales, where a resident governess was wanted to look after six children, the youngest eighteen months old, to manage their education, their wardrobe, and if the occasion arose, be left in entire charge of them and the house, all for the salary of twenty-four pounds a year. But I wouldn't take it: I have done that work and I know what it means. I have starved my soul and bruised my heart in just such a house as that already. It wasn't the actual work I hated, and the fact that you were never through with it, or the ceaseless worry, the racket of having a swarm of children always at your heels; it wasn't the indignity of the position, or even the utter hopelessness of ever getting out of the mill. I

could have put up with all that for a few words of thanks from the mother, for the crumbs of affection which were scattered to me from her table by the children. It was the awful loneliness. I couldn't face it again! There's no life more deadening. I was in another house where there was only one child, and the parents were very rich. They paid me well—forty-five pounds a year; that is good for a governess who has not taken high degrees, though there was a certain amount of responsibility attached to the post because the child was very delicate. But not even for double that sum would I torture myself again as I was tortured there!"

"What do you mean?"

"I was no longer a girl, I had begun to think; and, worst of all, I had begun to realize what life was likely to hold for me. Oh, I was lonely there! Nobody wanted me. They were kind to me, very kind, but they were so rich and so happy that they had no thoughts to spare for the governess upstairs. I took my meals alone, or with the child. Downstairs I could hear the laughter of guests. When there was a house-party staying there, I often caught sight of girls and men playing tennis or lounging in the garden—girls of the same age as myself, of much the same station, but with the better luck that their parents had succeeded where mine had failed. That used to hurt me at first—I used to long for their pleasures and gaiety; but I grew out of that. For days and days and days I used to speak to no one but the servants and the child, except for a word or two with his mother at night or in the morning. I was starved for companionship, for the right to speak and think with my fellow-men. For what is a child's mind to a grown-up woman's? Sometimes his prattle at meal-times used almost to drive me mad. My only chance was to read at nights when he had gone to sleep. And at first I did read, greedily. But after a time I couldn't even do this—I just sat and cried till it was time to go to bed.

"The servants had a better life of it than I had; at least they had companionship. I often used to envy

them, down in the cosy servants' hall. But I had nothing—nothing except the child. He grew to love me, that was my only spar to cling to, otherwise I think I should have gone mad. But I paid dearly for that—I suppose it's the same with all women, but ever since I can remember I have longed to have children of my own. When I was quite small, my dolls were real to me. Once, I remember clearly—I was ashamed of it at the time and never told anyone—I prayed to God that he would give me a child in the night. I was only twelve, and my governess had told me the usual fairy-tales! I was miserable in the morning when I woke to find that I was still holding in my arms only a doll!

"As I grew up I always took it for granted that I should marry and have a home of my own and children. I have told you how my mother died when I was eighteen and I had to look after my invalid father. That took up all my time. Then, when my father died and his pension died with him, I went into the hospitals to train as a nurse. Bad luck dogged me there. I was happy and loved the work; I was the most successful probationer of my year, till my health broke down and the doctors told me that I must rest. You know all this. Of course I was bitterly disappointed, but I still had hope to help me on; I still felt that I had my chances before me, that one day I should come into my own.

"It was not until I was a governess that I began to realize where I was standing. There was I, twenty-eight, as cut off from the world where men and women meet each other as though I was immured in a fortress. Already I was finding white hairs among the brown. What chance of my hopes being realized was there? And all the time I had that child to remind me of what I was missing! Oh, Lesley, I can't tell you what a hell it was! I grew so jealous of his love that it was pain to me to know that he was with his mother! I used to imagine sometimes what life would really be like if he belonged to me. And all the time he crept closer and closer into my heart and the pain of loneliness grew

worse and worse. I used to try and fight it down as though it was a sin, but I couldn't be ashamed of it, try as I would. It was nature, not I myself, who was crying out. There was I, a potential wife and mother, cooped up with someone else's child, giving paid service where my whole being cried out to give the service which is bought by love, a woman deprived by circumstances of everything which God meant her to have! If only the people themselves had understood it wouldn't have been so bad; if they had given me a little companionship, a little gaiety, a little intellectual stimulant, I could have gone on. As it was I ran away from it. I don't think I have got the kind of courage which can endure on an empty heart. That's why I would rather starve here in London, where we are workers together, than go back!"

Lesley was silent. She was recollecting some bitter words of Peter Webbe's. They had been sitting together under the stone-pines of the Borghese, and a down-trodden English nurse had passed by with her charges. Her face was dreary; she did not even light up at the beauty of the scene before her. As he looked after her, Peter had said, "Poor soul! I am sure she has wasted all the best years of her life, years when she was young and full of ambitions and hopes, in taking care of other people's children, when by all the laws of nature she should have been having children of her own. I suppose she has had to sell her natural instincts for respectability, and has been starving on that thin diet ever since!"

At the recollection Lesley's heart warmed to Peter. She had not realized in those days how far ahead of her he was in thoughts.

"I do wish you could get some other kind of work except governessing," she said at last.

"So do I," said Mary; "but it's difficult to find. In any case I have decided to leave the Club on Monday. I can't afford it while I am out of work, and, if I don't get a post as daily governess, I must try and go into a milliner's or dressmaker's workroom; they will be wanting

'hands' now. But even if I hear from the advertisement I answered yesterday, I shall only be able to afford a cubicle in a living-house, because they are offering so little."

"How much a week?"

"Twelve shillings."

"But you can't live on that!"

"No. I can't live on it, but I think I can exist, if I am careful, until something else turns up; and I shall still keep my name on the register of different agents for governess or face-massage work."

"Oh, Mary, this is awful!"

Mary laughed, though there was no gaiety in the sound. "Oh, it might be worse," she said. "I know of more than one woman, just like myself, only a little older, perhaps, who is starving on less than five shillings a week. And there are hundreds to whom this fate is likely to come to-morrow. I shan't starve on twelve shillings, and if the worst comes to the worst, well, I shan't stay on here in England where women are at such a discount; I shall go to the Colonies before it is too late. Women are wanted in the Colonies, which have work for everyone—and above all women like myself, who are not particularly brilliant or cultured or artistic, but willing and capable to do women's work—to sew and sweep and cook and tend the sick and, if the occasion arises, make homes on the outposts of the Empire!"

"But isn't the life terribly hard?"

"Yes," said Mary simply; "but women are wanted there, and to be wanted is the secret of happiness."

"Not for everyone," said Lesley.

"For every true woman it is, because to every true woman Life is service. Hasn't it ever dawned on you how our days are made up of service? If you do not serve others you serve yourself, the hardest taskmaster, and surely there is other work more worthy than this! You have only to watch the faces of the people in the streets to see how service is written upon them. It takes

some of us a long time to learn it, the learning breaks the spirit of others, and others again serve naturally: but we all come to it. There is restfulness in it for some, and a bitter unrest in it for others. And there is no escaping from it."

CHAPTER IV

ON THE COAST OF BOHEMIA

THE Manor House, Brook Green, had been built in the time of the third William and added to in nearly every subsequent reign. An entrance conservatory embellished with Murano glass, which the Aylmers always intended to rebuild, divided the house from the street. At night, hung with Arab lanterns, what Mark called its *villa*nous appearance escaped notice and it opened into a really charming feature, a hall in the shape of an inverted T, paved with black and white marble, which ran north and south to the dining-room and kitchen, and east through the rest of the house out into a garden of about an acre, which was a surprise and delight.

The back door of the hall opened on to a little paved court sunk below the level of the garden, from which it was divided by an Italian balustrade, which carried a row of old Chinese vases on the top and was pierced in the centre by a flight of steps leading up from the house. The garden had its grove and its *pièce d'eau* in the style of the eighteenth century, and its Japanese rockeries in the style of the twentieth, from which a waterfall fed a river which occasionally ran into the *pièce d'eau*. The back of the house contained two very fine rooms called respectively the drawing-room and the library, which had the disadvantage of only catching the eastern sun at

an hour when few people enter their drawing-rooms or their libraries. But the library Mrs. Aylmer used as her studio, in which the sun was not wanted, and on the north side of the garden adjoining the drawing-room the Aylmers had erected a one-story Arab house, roofed entirely with glass so as to admit all the sun. It was divided up by rows of Moorish arches like a mosque, and they used it not for plants, but as a museum in which their Eastern treasures were arranged upon the walls above the arches. In the centre was a Moorish fountain sunk in a tesselated floor. At night this Arab house, lit with electric lights contained in mosque lamps, looked almost like a mosque.

The T-shaped hall was repeated upstairs with a polished parquet floor, and was kept empty for impromptu dances, as a pianola standing at the far end suggested. The best bedrooms opened off this gallery, which was correctly decorated in the Georgian style, and hung with a wonderful collection of colour prints.

When Lesley arrived at nine o'clock, the house wore an air of emptiness and expectation. The entrance conservatory had become a gentlemen's cloak-room; the hall had a few hired seats shrinking against its walls; the drawing-room had been cleared for action, the studio tidied. Only the Arab house was left undisturbed, and that because it was intended for entertainments such as these, and contained nothing on the floor but benches and lounges; the curios were all upon the walls, forming part of the general scheme of decoration.

In the drawing-room, which still contained a good many beautiful objects in cabinets or on tables too large to be moved out, stood Marian Aylmer by the fireplace, talking to a man. Aylmer and the inevitable Rashleigh were in the Arab house; Aylmer was seeing that the drinks were right, and the "Inevitable" was distributing little trays of cigarettes. Mrs. Aylmer came forward to meet her.

"I am so glad you have remembered to come," she said, with her charming air of welcome.

"How could I forget! If I had not come it would

have been shyness, not forgetfulness, which stopped me."

"Oh, don't be shy," said Marian Aylmer, keeping Lesley's hand in hers as she led her across the room to the fireplace; "shyness is the one thing we workers have no time to overcome!" She looked round the room, and suddenly crossed it to bring over a man who was standing by himself. "Let me introduce Captain Lugard to you."

Lesley was not to know that he would afterwards become the famous pro-consul of Nigeria. She beheld in him a slight, not very tall man, with a firm sagacious face yellowed by African suns, and a high wise forehead from which the black hair was beginning to shrink. He had been dining at the house. Marian was certain that he was going to be a great man—perhaps her gift of portraiture with its need for a knowledge of physiognomy helped her intuition in these matters. He was fresh from his East African exploits, and was in a way the guest of the evening. Lesley found him simple and cordial for the few minutes that she talked to him. But people soon began to straggle in, and Marian tried to give each a word with him. Presently Mark Aylmer came to the entrance of the Arab House, which was his department, and lingered talking to Lesley at its door because, so far, no one had passed into it.

It was a curious crowd, not too Bohemian for evening dress, but the evening dress of some of the women could have been described more correctly as non-day-dress, being simply a day-dress with some feature added which would have made it ridiculous in the daylight. They were the wives and sisters and daughters of clever men. The women who were clever themselves mostly made some effort to be presentable. Mark told her the names of a few important persons, but explained that the great people did not generally arrive till other entertainments such as dinner-parties and theatres had closed. "But you must make their acquaintance," he said. These are the people who will be important in a few years' time,

and they take their art—writing or painting—very seriously now. They come early because they are doing us the honour of making this the only party to which they are going to-night, and because they have been working all day and are eager for their relaxation to begin. The funny thing is that the writers seem to work all day like the painters, when they might be out in the sun playing games. They seem to forget that they could do their work at any time."

To Mark Aylmer playing games was still the chief interest in life.

Lesley was not worried by her ignorance of the names of the budding novelists and artists to whom she was introduced, for she knew no names beyond those which were household words. She found most of them friendly and interesting. Bohemians like meeting pretty, well-dressed women who are not performers themselves, but belong to the audience, and they became very friendly when she confessed that she too was working just outside the threshold of literature.

As the hour grew late guests crowded and crowded in. At first sight everyone seemed to know each other; but this was only apparent—Marian was introducing hard the whole time. Gradually people edged their way into the Arab House; the drinks and smokes were kept there, partly to induce the flow in that direction, because there was room for everybody in it and it was the end of the house, partly because the smell of stale smoke signified least, and disappeared soonest there.

Lesley wandered in with Mrs. Kilpin, the wife of an artist, who took her under her wing and kept introducing whoever happened to be near. There seemed to be nobody whom she did not know, and in that set there were not many. She had been an actress before she married Bernard Kilpin; and her at-homes were as popular in their way as the Aylmers', though there were many important people who found their way to the Manor House who remained quite outside her sphere. She was a pretty, fair woman, much younger than her husband,

who was art-critic as well as artist, and had been the friend of Rossetti and Burne-Jones. She decided that Lesley would be an ornament to her at-homes, the right kind of woman to introduce to male celebrities, so she determined to annex her.

By and by more important authors and artists began to turn up. Mrs. Kilpin pointed out the giant figure and bluff good-humoured face of Conan Doyle; J. M. Barrie, looking half-student, half-invalid; Jerome K. Jerome, a man of reddish colouring, self-reliant in his stance and with a twinkle behind his glasses; Anthony Hope, looking like the Dante in the Chapel of the Bargello, as he stood pensively, silhouetted against the crowd; F. W. Robinson, with his short thick-set figure and long thick-set moustache; Israel Zangwill, looking like a Hebrew prophet, with his ascetic figure, his leonine head, his attitude of lifting up his voice; Coulson Kernahan, more like a rollicking soldier than an author; Frankfort Moore, a debonair Irishman leaving a trail of laughter wherever he went; Walter Besant, with jovial smile and indignant blue eyes; Thomas Hardy, a silent watcher; S. R. Crockett, a huge man, unspoiled by success, with a Saxon beard; Mrs. Humphry Ward, the famous Matthew Arnold's famous niece, dignified and urbane; Flora Annie Steel, the embodiment of vigour with her fresh-coloured face and her white hair; Marie Corelli, petite and fair; Lucas Malet, Charles Kingsley's daughter; Margaret Woods, with pale classical features and soulful eyes; Mrs. W. K. Clifford, alert and always surrounded by distinguished people; John Oliver Hobbes, pretty, youthful and gracious, so soon to be snatched away; Miss Montresor, delicate and shy; Mrs. Croker, with a beautiful daughter a replica of herself.

All these Mrs. Kilpin pointed out to Lesley, making her feel that the misfortunes at Rome were blessings in disguise if they were to bring her where she could rub shoulders with authors whose names were household words in England and America.

Then she began to point out artists; great painters

like Leighton and Fildes, with their fine heads and well-trimmed beards; J. J. Shannon, looking too youthful for his fame, and an occasional genius like the fair boyish consumptive Beardsley, with a message behind his exquisite handiwork; or William Nicholson, the great portrait painter, who looked a mere boy; or Phil May, the wit with the head of a mediæval jester.

Beyond talk, there was no entertainment of any kind. But there was talk in many moods; artists were talking shop and condemning each other's methods; authors were talking shop, sometimes expressing their homage for a great new book, sometimes romancing about their own prices and circulations, but seldom envious in their judgments. The youngest men were trying to monopolize the prettiest girls and, where they succeeded, were talking ball-room prattle or paving the way for love. But the girls were often deaf, for they had gone to the Aylmers' not to meet their ball-room lovers, but to conquer celebrities with their smiles. Housekeepers' troubles, and scandalous disclosures about other people's failings, may have crept into the conversation of the elder women—for these women were not all themselves concerned with the Arts. They might be only wives or sisters or mothers, whereas, except Mark Aylmer himself, there was hardly a man present as the husband of a celebrity. What male drones there were talked sport, or told stories of which you only heard the laughter. Towards mid-night people came in from the theatres—people who had been seeing plays, mostly on passes, and theatrical people—Harry Irving, like his father come back to earth; Oscar Asche and Laurence Irving, like villains from their own plays in the smooth garb of innocence; Cyril Maude, with his immortal smile; Charles Hawtrey looking like himself, and Wyndham like a bored country gentleman; James Welch, as childish and bland as he is before a burst of wild comedy on the stage; George Alexander, the prince of drawing-room drama; and the Grossmiths, monarchs of farce.

Blue-eyed Lena Ashwell was not easy to recognize off

the stage without her character make-up; most of the wives of the actor managers, whether they were actresses or not, tried to look like great ladies; but pretty Dorothea Baird could not seem otherwise than ingenuous. Mrs. Patrick Campbell looked like a dark Lucrezia Borgia veiling passion and murder with sensuous beauty and irresistible graces; Ellen Terry, absolutely charming, was pretending to recollect a number of people, whom she did not know, because she had forgotten the faces of so many people whom she ought to know; the generation of the Moores and the Vanbrughs, without losing the stage, were shining as women in a brilliant company.

At the back of the theatrical stars the Society people, who hang on the skirts of Bohemia and salt their dinner-tables with celebrities, came on from other parties. Quite an undue proportion of the women were very pretty, for it is the very pretty women in Society who draw Bohemia round them. The celebrity gravitates to them at other people's parties, and invitations, mutually delightful to hostess and guest, are apt to follow.

That gravitation was going on now, and it made the scene brilliant. The Arab House, which was really a great winter garden broken up by arches, provided, as Marian Aylmer, when she built it, had intended it should provide, a fine stage for the assemblage, because you could see the various groups at the same time. Sometimes it was a celebrity ringed with hostesses, sometimes it was an irresistible hostess ringed with celebrities; but there was generally the combination in some form.

When there was a lull in the arrivals Mrs. Aylmer came to look for Lesley. She thought the girl would like to meet the celebrities, and she knew that they would like to meet her. Lesley with her frank open-air beauty and her upright active figure, and her wardrobe still undecimated, was of the type which is most popular in Bohemia. For Bohemia is constantly being invaded by women whose attractions carry them further than their abilities, and Bohemia likes it. Clear-eyed Lesley, with the face and the exquisite head of a Greek statue, had

no such invasion in her mind. She was merely a guest at a party, and she did not know if she would ever be at such another party.

Mrs. Kilpin's fairness flushed with pleasure when Marian Aylmer said to her, "You know all these people, bring Miss Brydges along with you and help me to introduce her."

Mrs. Kilpin knew most of them only a very little. They did not come to her parties, which were too Bohemian for them. But in Bohemia it never signifies if the introducer knows the people she is introducing to each other, though you don't speak until you are introduced unless you are two famous people who know each other by sight but have never happened to be within speaking distance before. Mrs. Kilpin knew perfectly well that any of them would welcome her, if it was to bring a girl like Lesley into the conversation.

Lesley, who was unaccustomed to the procedure, felt so shy that, unless the person to whom she was introduced took possession of her, she relapsed after a few minutes into the very interesting conversation of Mrs. Kilpin, who, *sotto voce*, kept up a fire of explanations of the celebrity of the people to whom they were talking. Lesley enjoyed this much more than the introductions. For the people were so occupied with each other that she could study them, without being observed, from as near as if she had been talking to them.

As the evening wore on, one or other did take possession of her; the men's topics of conversation were limited to themselves and flattery. There was no interchange of intellect; in the whole house there had been very little intellectual conversation, which had not been prompted by shop; the guests had not come for that, they had come to enjoy themselves by making fresh friends among clever and pretty people. There is no pleasanter entertainment than widening your acquaintance among the hatchings of the Incubator of Fame.

After one a.m. the Aylmers were host and hostess no longer. They wandered about and enjoyed themselves

with their friends. Some intimate like the inevitable Rashleigh took charge for them and told people, who wanted to say good-bye to them, where they could be found.

It was then that Mark Aylmer made his way to Lesley to renew the pleasant acquaintance, begun at the dance, with the daughter of his schoolboy idol.

It was natural for her to say something about the curios which were near her, and natural for him to take her round the house showing her the possessions of which he was proudest. Lesley having been brought up in a flat full of old Italian curios, though she had never studied them seriously, could talk about them intelligently. They established a fresh link between her and the Aylmers, for Mrs. Aylmer was a collector. But Mark reminded her of her father almost painfully.

How like her father it was that, though he was willing to amuse her by showing her round his house and its treasures, he was in his heart much more interested to hear that she was a golfer, and would love to get her game once a week. As he played nearly every day, it did not matter to him giving up his Sunday to playing with a lady; it was arranged that she should lunch with them on the following Sunday and go to Ranelagh.

Lesley went on talking with Mark quite naturally. He was a simple and unpresuming man, and she had no idea what an important person he was in his own circle.

Suddenly they heard applause from the Arab House, and he said: "Something's up! let's go and see what it is."

They found nearly all the people who remained, standing or sitting round a tall young man, most expensively turned out, with fair hair, merry blue eyes and a round humorous face with a queer nose—the face of a boxer who would never know when he was beaten. He was in fact a famous boxer, and formidable in several sports. He was very popular and not known to be vicious in any way. But he made such diabolical grimaces in his comic recitations, which were extremely humorous, that one

could have believed anything of him, while they lasted. The recitation was a paradoxical account of the iniquities of the youthful George Washington, and Lesley, like the rest of the audience, was convulsed with laughter.

"Is he a professional?" she asked.

"No, he's a millionaire. At all events, he is very rich. He's a cotton spinner with a fine place in Lancashire, but he has a flat in the Savoy Hotel in which he spends most of his time. He's an awfully nice chap; he makes no parade of his money beyond being very generous with it. I must introduce him to you because he gives all sorts of jolly parties."

When the blue-eyed young man had finished his recitation and two encores, rapturously applauded, he sat down and fanned himself with something ridiculous.

Aylmer brought him up struggling vainly with a forelock, which he had pulled over his eyes to express the disorderliness of the youthful Washington.

"Miss Brydges, may I introduce Mr. Clarence Verity."

She gave him a little bow—it was captivating though she had no idea of this, and said:

"I want to thank you for that entertainment: I don't think I ever heard anything so funny."

"'Service'" he said, pulling his forelock with such a grimace that Lesley went off into another fit of laughter.

When she had finished she found him quite serious. He wished to know if she wrote or was an artist. "I can see that you are not on the stage."

"How?" she asked.

"Because you haven't been acting, The first thing an actress does when you are introduced to her, is to act."

"You don't like stage ladies?"

"They frighten me."

"Why?"

"They move so fast."

"I shall be afraid to open my mouth."

"Let's be serious," he said pleasantly. "Do you write or paint?"

"I only copy other people's writings."

"You're not a typist. I'm sure you can't be."

"No, not quite that. I copy out things in libraries: it's called research work, but all I do is purely mechanical."

"How dull! Why don't you do writing for yourself?"

"I couldn't. Besides if I could, I mightn't be able to get any publisher to buy it. I want the money, and in my job I get it every week."

"Well, it may lead to your doing writing of your own."

"I'm sure I haven't enough brains."

"I'm sure you have."

"That remains to be proved. What do you do, Mr. Verity?"

"I? Nothing! I'm audience. I go to all the plays and picture galleries and buy the last book of every author I meet. If I like it I buy their other books, and I sometimes buy pictures. That's all I'm good for."

"I expect that the authors and artists wish there were some more like you."

"It's all that I can do to justify my existence."

"I suppose you play games?"

"Oh yes, Aylmer and I sometimes have a hard fight to win half a crown from each other at golf. Do you play, Miss Brydges?"

Lesley gave another of her little nods. It might have been assent as well as good-bye. She had just seen a friend and was going across the room full sail to meet him. He was a small thin man with a pale sensitive face, and large dark eyes which burned with intellect, not passion.

"Oh, Ken!" she cried, "I *am* glad to see you!"

"Lesley! But how did you come here? I didn't even know that you were in London!"

"Let's edge our way out of this crowd to some place where we can sit down and talk. I've got so much to tell you, and you can't think what a joy it is to see a face I know in this gathering of strangers!"

They found a seat in one of the alcoves of the Moorish hall near a little table furnished with an ancient brass casket full of cigarettes.

"Begin at the beginning," demanded Ken in his boyish

way. "I left Rome, as you know, just before that awful accident to your father. You answered the letter I wrote to you then, but when I wrote later, I got no reply. I have been meaning and hoping to go back to Rome ever since, so I did not write again. My conscience often smote me, but somehow—well, life was going badly with me, and I had no heart to write."

"I am sorry," said Lesley, "that things have gone wrong with you. I was afraid that you would be unhappy away from your beloved Italy! I often wondered why you didn't come back; why was it?"

"Because of my mother," said Ken. "You remember that the lawyer who was her trustee sent for me suddenly? When I arrived here, I found that practically every penny of her little income had been swallowed up by the failure of the insurance company from which we bought her annuity; but for friends she would have been starving. I had to do something to support her: painting was out of the question. I could not even keep myself on that in London, where you pay your greengrocer in pennies instead of farthings. The painting has had to go to the wall; at first it looked as if I should have to return to the stool. I can tell you, Lesley, my courage failed me then, for a time! But luck was with me! One day when I was tramping along the Strand, feeling pretty well as though I had been beaten at last by the bludgeonings of Fate, I met a man I used to know in the studios in Paris. When he heard that I was looking for work he took me along to the editor of the *British Artist*. My friend knew him well. He impressed upon him that I was the very person to fill the post of sub-editor, which happened to be vacant, and somehow or other, I don't know myself how it happened, I got the job!"

"I don't think I've ever heard of the *British Artist*," said Lesley slowly.

Ken threw up his head with a little shout of laughter. "Of course you haven't! why should you? It's nothing to do with Art, not as you and I understand it; it has

not even anything to do with Life. It is miserably Philistine in its outlook and the pay is very bad, but it gives me a regular income and the entrée to all the Art shows. It also gives me important copy that helps me to do art notes for two of the Daily papers, which make a considerable addition to my income."

"Which two?"

"The worst. I won't mention names! And the artists ask me to their parties; that's why you see me here!"

"Oh, Ken, I am sorry," said Lesley, divining what a struggle he must have had.

Ken laid his hand on hers impulsively for a moment. "Thank you," he said. Then his smile came back again. "It was all for the best seeing that it has brought us together! But isn't it just like me or any other masculine thing, to have talked of my stupid self when I came out of the crowd on purpose to hear what had brought you here!"

"That's a long story," said Lesley, "too long to tell now. I have left Rome for good and I am working here in London, doing research work at the Colonial Office."

"Working? Why?" It was on the tip of his tongue to ask if her stepmother was with her, but remembering the friction between the two women, which had so distressed him, he refrained.

"To earn my living, of course."

"But . . .?"

Lesley told him a little of what had happened since he left Rome. He listened in silence until she had finished, and then he said:

"What a shame, when you had such a lovely home!"

"Do you see anything shameful in work?"

"You know that I don't," he answered warmly, "but I think it a shame that you should have been driven from your home."

"I wasn't driven. There was really not enough for Esme and me to live on. Besides, the position would

have been intolerable; you know how antagonistic we were to each other from the beginning."

"But was there nothing for you?"

"No," said Lesley simply, "nothing. Of course father trusted her implicitly and, if his affairs had only righted themselves before he died, I believe she would have treated me well. We should never have lived together, but I am sure that she would have made me a good allowance. As things were, it was too much to expect of human nature that she should put herself out to help me substantially. Still, you'll be pleased to hear that we were better friends towards the end."

But Ken was not listening. "I call it scandalous!" he cried, hitting his clenched right hand into the open palm of his left. "Scandalous! What right have human beings to treat each other like this. Of what use are civilization, education, religion, if we still behave to our children as the animals of the field behave to their young! I blame your father for this! I know it was an accident; I know that if he had lived his affairs would have probably righted themselves. But to my mind he is as much a criminal as the man who embezzles money which is given him in trust. It was more than money he had in trust, it was the life and welfare of the women of his family. And it is this damnable irresponsibility of educated men and women to the duty they owe to each other which is causing one of the social evils of civilization, the flooding of the markets of the world with women, who are neither represented in the State nor supported by their men-folk, and who are unqualified, both physically and by their lack of suitable education, to demand a living wage!"

"Oh, Ken, Ken! Don't be so bitter about it. You don't understand. Besides I'm quite happy. Now that the wrench of parting is over I'm gloriously glad to be independent, to be self-supporting, to be groping my way in this new environment of action! Who was it said: 'You may not be able to lengthen your life, but you can broaden it?' And that is what one does when one

comes down into the world of reality from the beautiful City of Dreams."

"I'm glad that you're happy," said Ken, gently, "though I wonder that you are! But, for my part, I can't help feeling bitter about it. It's a subject which lies very close to my heart. It hurts me just like a personal hurt that human nature can be so callous. One half the world is drugged with pleasure, the other half starves; only a handful of people think. That's why I hate London so! To me it is a prison as well as a workhouse and a charnel-house of hopes. My life, you see, has been led among the workers; it is the poor of London that I know, not the rich; and when I say poor, I don't mean the comfortable lower-middle-class and artisans who live in neat houses with rows of small gardens, who are born in that way of life and desire nothing better than a semi-detached villa at Putney, and the means to pay for cheaply-bought pleasures: their heaven is easy of attainment. It is the workers who were not meant to be workers, the poor who were not born to be poor, the superfluous women, the ones who are not wanted, that fire my soul! Who shall write the story of their lives? Who shall glorify their courage with sagas? They are failures—failures in their own eyes, failures in the eyes of the world; but for me, their splendid, pitiful courage places them among the great ones. And, Lesley, it is men like your father, forgive me if I hurt you, who are the worst offenders. It is they who are to blame—the good fellows of the world, who marry and have children, and then manage their affairs so that, when death overtakes them suddenly or they have to bear up against some financial loss, their wives and daughters are thrown upon a world utterly unprovided against want, without money and without the means to earn it, with no capital except the indomitable courage which, to my mind, is the finest characteristic of the modern woman."

"But is there a remedy?" asked Lesley.

"There is no remedy, while human nature hardens its heart against the sufferings of others. Of course there

are technically two ways out of the difficulty—one is to give the sort of education which is going to be of service in the future, and the other is the recognition by the State of the value of every soul in the community, whether man or woman. But the State is too busy with its great gamble of Party Politics to recognize souls. Besides, when it tries to deal with the question of the poor, it never touches the class we are speaking of at all. So you see, my dear Lesley, I am still tilting at windmills, just as I used to in Rome."

"This is no windmill, dear Quixote, this is one of the real giants," said Lesley seriously. Then she was silent; Ken's words had made her think of Mary Strange; she wondered what she was doing now, whether life in a cubicle was as terrible as she imagined. She made a mental note that she would run round to the house, to which Mary had gone, on the very next Saturday to hear her news. But she did not realize how circumstances and the exigencies of work had swept Mary for the time being out of her life.

"What is your address," said Ken, "I shall come and look you up."

"You will find me at the Buckingham Palace Club."

"That sounds very grand."

"It's called after the Road, not the Palace. Number 399."

"I shall call next Sunday afternoon."

"No, not Sunday; I shall be playing golf with our host."

"I'm sorry. It's the only day I have."

"Couldn't you come in the evening?"

"Of course I could, any evening. I get away from the office at six."

"Oh, Ken, don't," said Lesley, getting up. "I can't bear to think of you in an office, after the Pincian! Where do you live?"

"Number 2, William Street, off the Belgrave Road."

"I can give you a lift most of the way, then: I shall have to take a cab."

"I'll share a cab with you, but I won't take a lift."

"Very well; it's the best way. If we are going to do things together we shall have to make a hard and fast bargain each to pay our own footing."

He gave a sort of shamefaced assent.

"And now we must find our hostess to say good-night."

Clarence Verity was standing beside Mrs. Aylmer when Lesley went up to her.

"How are you going to get home, Miss Brydges? Let me motor you back. I've got my car here."

"No thank you, Mr. Verity. I'm going to share a cab with Mr. Western."

"Oh, how absurd—spending money when it would be a pleasure to me."

"But I've promised Mr. Western," said Lesley firmly.

"I can take you both, and two or three more besides."

"I must leave it to Mr. Western."

"Of course he'll say yes, dear," said matter-of-fact Mrs. Aylmer. "I shan't allow him to say anything else."

Thus it was that Lesley found herself leaning back on the luxurious white cushions of Clarence Verity's 57 h.p. Daimler, and he learned where she lived.

He was either very good-natured or very tactful, for he laid himself out to be interesting to Ken Western, taking care that Lesley should not be left out of the conversation.

CHAPTER V

THE WISDOM OF CLARENCE VERITY

CLARENCE VERITY was wise in his generation. He knew that the beautiful actresses of Musical Comedy are not interested in rich young men from the north, except as husbands or for the money which they can get out of them, and with few exceptions, these were the only actresses who attracted him. Also he had been a clever boy at Marlborough and Oxford, and had ideas of enjoyment not quite so limited as theirs. In fact, he used to treat Chilworth the Novelist, who had been head of Marlborough in his time, to long trips abroad so as to have the pleasure of seeing the world in the society of a man who understood what to look for. When he came up to London he wanted to see as much of his famous friend as he could without consuming working hours, so Chilworth used to get cards for him to whatever Bohemian function he had in view for himself.

He did this not because he expected the functions to amuse Verity particularly, but because he knew that Verity just wanted to be with him. Knowing Chilworth was at that time the pride of Verity's life.

Verity had not attended many of these functions before he became aware that it was here and not in the Green Room that he was likely to meet the type of woman who interested him most—the pretty young girl full of energy and hope, who wished to succeed in literature or painting,

and knew the value of personality. He met many who obtained work from editors, where others, far their superiors in intellect and even in journalistic intelligence, failed, because they used the graces of their womanhood frankly. Without being fast, they ingratiated themselves with their prettiness, their charm, their good taste in dress, their willingness to be taken out to dinner or to the theatre, or up the river, and their frank sympathy. Editors, for instance, like girl friends of this sort and like to help them to keep their heads above water financially by bestowing the pickings in their patronage on them. In the nature of things, these girls are unusually attractive. It is because they are intellectual, that they count on the help of editors, and because they are dear women that they succeed. The same thing *mutatis mutandis* happens in painting, and the other Bohemian professions. But the greater number of the women who make Bohemia so delightful, look to authorship or journalism for a living.

Clarence Verity soon struck up some great friendships with them. He was not an editor, but he could save them cab fares, and his dinners had a sterling value for girls who treated themselves to very scanty meals in order to have more money for their pleasures, and often, be it confessed, for their rent. On nights when he could not be with his beloved Chilworth he would take a couple of them and a man friend to a theatre or a dance. Mrs. Grundy suspected him of being wicked because he was so careful never to invite one of these girls out to dinner alone ; so much regard for the conventions must, she argued, be a blind for secret sin. He celebrated St. Valentine's Day and Christmas Day with gloves, and their birthdays too, when he knew them.

He had never been to the Kilpins, but he procured an invitation through the Aylmers, and on their next evening he came in his car to take Lesley, who had asked Mrs. Kilpin if she might bring a friend with her, because she was too shy to come alone. The friend was Agnes Openshaw.

Lesley was disturbed by the way in which Agnes started a friendship with Clarence Verity from the moment

that they were introduced. Agnes, with her velvety brown eyes and bright colour and her large, frank, sensitive mouth, which disclosed such glorious teeth, was born to be loved; she was a mendicant for love. If she had found a husband to keep her in comfort she would have been a radiant wife and mother; but the majority of the denizens of Bohemia do not look for matrimony at the end of the frivolities with which they lighten the darkness that succeeds a day of toil.

Like Lesley, she had not been brought up with the idea of earning her own living. The smart private school, where she was educated, considered that grace of manner and the development of individuality were of more importance than mere knowledge. By nature she was intended for a social life. Given the opportunities, which had been promised to her in girlhood, she would have been brilliantly successful as a hostess; her adaptability, her intuition, her keen interest in the affairs of life, in Politics and the Arts, and her ready wit all fitted her to play the rôle. In any assembly people gathered round her instinctively, drawn by her magnetism and vitality, retained by the very real and intelligent sympathy which emanated from her. Her début had been marked with success in the short time which elapsed between her leaving school at eighteen, and the financial ruin of her father in a gigantic mining coup three years later. But after his death, which had been caused in the main by shock at his failure, and the death of her mother a year later, Agnes had gradually drifted away from her old friends. Not that she had any false pride about her poverty; but because in the social warfare which women wage upon each other, clothes are an armament almost as important as wit and beauty. For though there is a gulf between the well-dressed woman and the badly-dressed, there is a whole ocean between the woman who has a dress allowance, however small, and the girl whose hard-earned salary dwindles away week by week on food and lodging. And to quote Agnes's own words, "In society, though you may speak with the

tongues of men and of angels and have not the wherewithal to dress, you are apt to become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal."

At first she had kept up courageously with her rich friends; but little by little her clothes began to wear out, and she found, as so many other women have found, when they stand on the edge of the Maelstrom of Work, which sooner or later whirls them out of sight of all familiar landmarks, that she was driven by the force of circumstance to loosen her hold on everything which linked her to the shore of her old life. It was not only a question of dress, it was a question of interests. For when she did, at the end of her day's work, put on one of her still pretty frocks and go to a friend's house, she started with the disadvantage of knowing quite well that in the present state of her finances she certainly ought to go by 'bus or underground, instead of taxi. And when she arrived, just as she was conscious that her hair, no longer brushed and marcel-waved by a maid, was not *bien-soigné* like the rest of the women's, that her satin slippers had been cleaned so often that they were no longer pearl-white, and that her hands were not as daintily manicured as they used to be, so did she realize that she belonged to a different world from the men and women who were talking glibly of this play and the other, of this exhibition and that race-meeting, or the last production at the Opera. It needs courage to acknowledge in so many words, a dozen or more times in one evening, that you are not in the social swim. If you have been born to silk stockings and *Lucile* frocks, and you are so foolish or so unfortunate as to care for these things, two, or even three, pounds a week is not enough to live on. Agnes soon found out that it was not a question of the daintiness of life, it was a case of trying to clothe herself decently so that shabbiness should not mark her down as a failure to her fellow-workers or, more important still, to possible employers. Her beautiful impractical dresses wore out. She had lovely lingerie: every time it went out to the wretched cheap laundry it came back damaged.

Then came the pinch; there was something desperately depressing in the fact that all her silk stockings were in holes, that she wanted new gloves, that the last of her dainty under-wear was torn beyond repair. And when there was added to this the knowledge that she could never replace them, there was fit matter for the Devil to hand—a love of beauty fostered from childhood, and no means to gratify it—the natural desire for pleasure, admiration and love which was the heritage of youth, and no hope of attaining it.

Agnes, impatient of the ordered routine of her life and full of high spirits and *joie-de-vivre*, began to take her pleasures recklessly, sometimes indiscreetly. She was not much helped at this critical time by the fact that she was working as secretary in the establishment of Madame Tarobert, the great modiste of New Bond Street, whose models were famous throughout London for their beauty, and the pace they set. When the proverb says that it is the *premier pas qui coûte*, it lies. If only it did, there would be fewer falls from the eminence of virtue. It is the fact that the first few steps are so desperately easy, so astonishingly natural, which makes it hard to turn back. You do not realize how far you have strayed from the path, primrosing, till your hands are full of flowers, and then it often happens that a misguided sense of chivalry makes it more difficult to retrace your steps than the want of courage, or the want of resolution, to which the final downfall is assigned.

It was at this time that Dolly Illington first made his appearance: God and the Devil are the greatest Dramatists. Agnes had been working long enough to realize that the years were creeping by, and that she would never earn enough to make herself really independent. She was in debt already, and the further she plunged the more feverishly she danced, and dined, and motored with the many friends that girls of her type collect in the hinterland of London society which calls itself Bohemia.

She was not in the literary set to which the Aylmers had introduced Lesley, but she knew Clarence Verity

by sight, and, while they were still in the car driving to Mrs. Kilpin's house in West Kensington, they discovered several mutual friends.

"It's rather curious that we should meet at last, Miss Openshaw," Clarence said, when Lesley introduced them; "I seem to know you quite well, because we have honoured so many of the same functions with our distinguished presence."

Agnes laughed. "We have plenty of tastes in common. Dolly will be interested to know that we have met; he has often spoken to me of you."

"Do you know Mr. Illington?" asked Lesley of Verity, in surprise. She mistrusted "Dolly" and wished that Agnes did not see so much of him.

"We were up at Oxford together," said Clarence briefly, he had certain reservations about men of the type, to which Mr. Adolphus Illington belonged.

His eyes were for Lesley: he only included Agnes as a chaperone. Still, they went to Mrs. Kilpin's a merry party, and Mrs. Kilpin was duly impressed by Lesley's having Verity "in tow."

Her at-home was not so interesting as the Aylmers'. People went there professionally, not to call on their hostess, but to meet such celebrities as she could collect. Yet they were in themselves interesting, for not only those who were emerging into success were represented, but the rank and file whose names never appear in periodicals or on programmes—minor members of newspaper staffs, unbilled actors and actresses, painters who had not yet been hung in the Academy, musicians in orchestras, clerks in publishers' offices, or great distributing agencies like W. H. Smith's and Simpkin's. Mrs. Kilpin asked them partly because she was good-hearted and democratic, partly because she thought they counted for the advancement of Bernard Kilpin, artist, author and journalist. There were several people in the room who could have given an opinion inferior to none in London about the respective commercial value of the more successful authors and artists.

But Lesley did not yet know enough about the Arts to understand what interesting "shop" was being talked, and she missed the excitement she had enjoyed at the Aylmers of having pointed out to her every minute someone whose name was a household word. She was not much more interested in Clarence Verity's conversation, which was of the make-yourself-pleasant order.

Suddenly there was a raid on the furniture and, in a few minutes, the studio was bare except for the piano in the corner, on which a professional pianiste, who was to be introduced to fame instead of being paid, flung out a waltz with a mastery of which the instrument was quite unworthy, and nearly everyone in the room—the artists at any rate who haunt balls at popular prices in Chelsea—paired off to dance.

As Lesley was one of the prettiest girls in the room, and by far the best dressed, there were numerous aspirants for an introduction to her. She was cordial, but she would not dance; it was not the sort of place, where she wished to dance at all, neither were these the sort of partners she desired. Lesley had been born fastidious about the kind of man who should enjoy the intimacy of dancing with her, and the exquisites of the Italian aristocracy, who had been her partners in Rome, had not tended to make her less particular about the personality and the dancing of mankind.

Clarence Verity was out of the room taking an elderly minor authoress to have coffee and sandwiches, when the music struck up, but he found his way back to it as soon as her appetite, which was not faltering, was satisfied.

There he found Lesley standing alone watching the waltzers.

"Aren't you dancing?" he asked.

"No."

"Don't you dance?"

"Of course, but one can't dance with people like these. Besides, I don't think I like impromptu dances except in a very right place."

Clarence stared at her. "You're awfully different from

any other girl I've met at these parties," he said at last.

Lesley laughed outright at the unwonted seriousness of his tone.

"Which way am I to take that?" she said. "Am I stupid? I suppose it is because I don't quite like the free-and-easiness of everyone."

"I'm glad you don't," said Clarence. "It gives me the chance of asking if I may have a dance instead of finding you booked six deep already."

"How can I let you when I have refused a score of others?"

"You can have been engaged to me for the evening."

Lesley laughed. "More free-and-easiness! Is that the fashion in Bohemia?"

"Of course," assented Clarence seriously, though his blue eyes twinkled at her. "After all, we did come together, didn't we?"

"But I said I wouldn't dance, and it would be too rude."

He hung about.

"Don't bother about me! Go away and get another partner. Agnes dances wonderfully. I have heard Dolly Illington say that she is the best dancer in London, and his opinion is of weight because he wins all sorts of prizes for being the best Bostoner at Covent Garden, and such places. She can't be engaged very far ahead as there are no programmes."

"I'd rather talk to you."

"Very well. Let's sit down."

Clarence's intuition told him that he had not yet succeeded in interesting Lesley Brydges in his personality. And to be interested in the personality of each other is the first stone in the edifice of a friendship between the sexes, whether romantic or platonic. With most of the girls he had met in such houses as the Aylmers, the mere fact that he was agreeable, amusing, anxious to entertain, and wealthy enough to do it *en prince*, was sufficient basis to go on, but with Lesley he felt that he must make some

special effort not only to amuse but to interest. Already, without being aware of it, he was in the dangerous stage of thinking that she was different from all the other women of his acquaintance; now he set himself to grope after her personality.

"Do tell me something about Italy and your life in Rome," he said. "I have never been there, and I'm awfully ignorant about that sort of thing."

Lesley was touched at this evidence of his desire to entertain her, when she guessed that he was really pining to dance; he had so much the cut of a dancing man. "I'm afraid there isn't much to tell you that wouldn't be boring. Life in Rome can be much the same as life in Paris or London."

"Yes, but not your life," said Clarence quickly.

"No," answered Lesley, and thought of Peter Webbe, and the many happy days they had spent together, wandering round the ruins of the Aventine and Palatine in the bright Roman sunshine.

They sat out waltz after waltz, though the pianiste, who was there in search of fame, had a genius for playing dance-music. Lesley, who was always too easily bored, might have felt it a tax on her patience if Tirebuck, with whom she exchanged rather stiff little bows, had not come in and taken up his position near enough for her to observe him.

He and Bernard Kilpin were fellow-contributors to *The Strand Gazette*, and the Kilpins plied him with invitations for their at-homes. Once in a way he put in a forced appearance for a few minutes, and this was one of his angel's visits.

He frankly disapproved of everything but Kilpin himself. Mrs. Kilpin with her push and her Bohemian upbringing was anathema to him; he hated Chelsea artists; he thought that no artist ought to be seen in public till he was an A.R.A., or as eminent as an A.R.A., and for the lower orders of journalists he could find no expression. There was only one name for the profession. He, the paragon, was a journalist, but then so was every reporter.

It was only on occasions like the present that he met them, for he never, if he could help it, went near the offices of the papers for which he wrote. He used to send in his copy by special messenger, and as he had a perfectly free hand, there was no necessity for him to see the editors.

Kilpin, on the other hand, was fond of busying round newspaper offices, and never lost an opportunity of making the acquaintance of anyone connected with the paper as a writer, in however humble a capacity. To him only the printers were below the salt. Reporters did not, of course, interest him like the men who wrote the book reviews, or criticisms of plays and picture exhibitions—not to mention editors and sub-editors. But he always pretended to them.

The men whom he met at the Kilpins did not annoy Tirebuck so much as the women. Mrs. Kilpin knew better than to introduce him to men, unless she had a stray eighteen-carat celebrity, but she was persistent in introducing him to the girls whom she thought belles—and her view and Tirebuck's view of a belle were different.

It did not matter what girl she introduced him to. He stood beside her with a polite smile fingering the rim of his opera-hat and answering in grave monosyllables, when he was addressed. But he never volunteered a remark.

In Agnes Mrs. Kilpin felt that she had at last secured something worthy of his attention. But for Agnes he conceived an active dislike. He thought she was bad form because she took him by the horns and actually ventured to chaff him about being so solemn ; she hinted that they were not supposed to stop talking for dance-music. But the climax was her asking him to have tea with her on the following day. His air of indifference vanished at this outrage. He scrutinized her to think how he should crush her, but discovering that she was sincere and nearly beautiful, fled without giving her an answer or even saying good-night to her or the Kilpins, though he meant to have had a talk with Lesley. He did not stop till he was safe outside the house ; he had not brought an overcoat, because he had come in a cab.

Lesley had observed the little comedy, and was about to cross over to Agnes to enjoy it, when the pianiste flung out the intoxicating notes of the favourite one-step of the day.

Verity noticed that Lesley was keeping time with a dainty foot, and he looked at her with such a pathetic twinkle in his eyes that she began to laugh and said, "Well, if you insist."

Before they had gone the length of the room she was captured with the *diablerie* of the moment. The Pied Piper of Hamelin might have been at the piano, the musician was so inspired; Lesley felt Italy in her veins again and danced on air.

When they sat down Verity said, "By Jove, you can dance, Miss Brydges! Aren't I to be allowed any more?"

She allowed him just one waltz and then just one more, and then she said, with her surprising frankness, "I can't say 'no' to a partner like you!"

After the first waltz all the men to whom she had said that she would not dance, came up and begged for the next.

"I'm engaged."

"Then may I have one lower down?"

"I'm afraid I'm engaged for them all."

She expected an implied rebuke, but these all-evening partnerships were the rule more than the exception in Chelsea Art-circles.

"I'm very sorry for you," said Lesley to Verity; "only you must remember that you said this would be my only decent excuse; but you needn't dance more than you like."

"If I knew you better, I should tell you not to throw a line for compliments! You know that there's no one like you!"

Something in the warmth of his tone implied that the compliment did not refer to her dancing only: she flushed a little, but prefered to take it strictly according to its context.

"Oh, well, we won't pretend. Let's dance till we are

dead—I don't mean for the term of our natural lives, but till we have no feet left."

"I want to," said Clarence ardently.

That night he went home with a fresh interest in life; in the coming months his way of living was to revolve round Lesley's whims and engagements; Chilworth was excused. While there was anything to be done with her, he refused or cancelled every other engagement; and Lesley gave herself up to the pleasure of his society. She no longer found him dull or limited in his conversation, for Clarence, with the natural and almost unconscious hypocrisy which distinguishes the male sex when it seeks to attract the female, set himself to climb up into Lesley's plane of thought. More than one merry damsel with whom he had danced and supped before the advent of Lesley Brydges would have opened her eyes in astonishment to hear the flippant Clarence inquiring about names in Italian history; or standing on the threshold of initiation into the mysteries of Browning; or taking a strong interest in the Suffrage as viewed from the standpoint of women workers. In Italy itself he really was interested. Had it not produced Lesley?

She was happy in these days. The worst of the winter was over, and now, in February, the afternoons had lengthened out, so that she was able to walk home in the soft violet dusk. Sometimes she wondered how it was that she had been able to settle down so easily into this round of routine after the freedom of her life in Rome. She thought herself one of the workers. She did not realize in the least the good-fortune which had smiled upon her, when Major Waugh entrusted his ponderous research work at the Colonial Office to her. She hardly wrote to anyone in Italy now, except an occasional letter to old Sister Bonaventura in the Convent of the Giglio at Assisi. Esme had gone to Japan, where she expected to stay for the next two years, with a distant cousin.

Lesley had only written once again to Peter Webbe because his formal but friendly letters made her feel, more than anything else, that she had shut the door of the

old world upon herself. Deep in her heart she realized that Peter would not understand her way of living any more than he would understand the rush and gaiety of her friendship with Clarence Verity and the men and girls whom she had met at the Aylmers' or at the Club itself.

And Lesley realized also that somehow or other, in a quite inexplicable fashion, she was disappointed in herself. In Assisi it had seemed that the doors of her soul stood ajar; the selfishness, the forgetfulness, the callousness of youth had slipped away at the advent of sorrow. For happiness is a garden surrounded by a high wall of content, which shuts out everything except the sky; but sorrow is like standing on the mountains with the power which Satan gave to Christ, when he tempted Him in the wilderness, offering "all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time." She saw life stretching out before her full of possibilities, far nobler than she had conceived it. Certain passages culled from books which she had loved, and stored in her memory, cropped up in her everyday thoughts, enriched with meaning so much deeper that she wondered how she had ever thought them beautiful, seeing how little she had understood them.

But here in London success had come so easily, the struggle had been so small, the conditions of life so matter-of-fact, that those long summer days in Assisi, spent for the most part on the flowery hillsides, thinking, thinking, thinking, were like a dream. Work as a means of livelihood, pleasure as a drug for forgetting, seemed to be the burden of the song she heard her companions singing, and in proportion as she was whirled faster on the pleasure tide, her interest lessened in work and in humanity, and in the great schemes which were afoot on every hand. For pleasure, like great riches, dulls the souls of those who do not understand its value.

London was still a city of romance; each day she enjoyed afresh the walk through St. James' Park, with its mists, and its stretches of water beyond which the roofs of Whitehall and that unexplored hinterland, the Strand, towered above the white mass of the Horse Guards

as fantastic as the turrets of an enchanted city in a fairy-book. The occasional burst of martial music in the Mall never failed to thrill her. She was as excited as a child to see the Royal cream ponies being exercised by grooms, and Whitehall was a never-ending delight, with its great offices, and its air of state, and its magnificent effects of sunset, when the winter sun went down in saffron mist behind the pinnacles of Westminster.

Every omnibus held food for half a dozen stories; indeed, it takes a long time before the stranger that is within her gates can ignore the romance of a London omnibus! For there the rich and the poor jostle each other so closely that a philosopher could write a history of humanity from the faces and behaviour of the occupants.

But though she was conscientious enough, she lost interest in her work; it became a toil to search for materials, which she knew could never be utilized, in the yellowed pages of the records. And she was disgusted with the monotony and tastelessness of the food in the restaurant near the Colonial Office where she lunched. At first it had amused and interested her to watch the other lunchers, and she had invented an ingenious variety of *menus*, keeping within the seven pence which was all she allowed herself to spend each day.

Now the whole atmosphere of Geary's depressed her from the moment that she pushed open the swing-doors, and met the warm rush of air heavy with the smell of miscellaneous cooking, to the moment when she stood in the little queue before the pay-box at the close of her hour of freedom. She was unutterably depressed by the dreariness of the company of women, who lunched at the six or eight little tables which were set apart for their exclusive use in an inner room; later she understood their courage. She soon knew them all by sight, and was able to guess to a certainty what they would take—generally a scone and a glass of milk, spun out for three-quarters of an hour by the chimes of Big Ben, with the aid of a much-thumbed novel from a Free Library. Some of them were

woefully undersized and pale. They saddened her, and yet were a distraction to her, when she tried to think, because they seemed to voice a question on some matter which she felt touched her closely. After a time she dreaded the ordeal of facing them, and took her *Daily Telegraph* with her, and, when she had glanced cursorily through the bill-of-fare, propped up her newspaper against the cruet-stand and read, regardless of the coming and going of the other occupants of the room, forgetful of the marble table, bare of cloth or napkin—a sore trial to her at first—indifferent to the dull food which a harassed waitress planked down noisily before her.

She would have felt unutterably depressed if it had not been for the promise of pleasure at the end of the day. Every evening Clarence Verity was waiting to escort her somewhere; he would have arranged for a dinner, a dance, or a theatre and supper-party, every night if Lesley had been willing. But she found that on the day after a dance, and still more on the day after two late nights, she could hardly keep awake in the somnolent atmosphere of the Colonial Office, and she limited herself in her dances to once a week.

"What does it matter if you are sleepy!" protested Agnes. "The research work will never be published—you say so yourself—and you are paid by the week, not by the piece."

"Yes," said Lesley, "I'm hired by the week, so my week belongs to somebody else, and, if I'm not in a condition to do my best work, I'm robbing him."

"Well, if you feel like that, why don't you ask Major Waugh's leave to go, and explain that it will make you slack?"

"Agnes!"

"Well, why not?"

"Because I have too much respect for him and myself, and the character of women as workers."

"You're talking like Mary now," said Agnes. "But you'll get over it. You'll learn that for us women work does not consist in achieving results, but in earning the

means to live. Men complain that they can't find competent women clerks; they would find them all right if they would pay them a decent wage, and give them some hope of promotion, so that they could live like human beings, and hope eventually to be able to put by enough to support their old age. As it is, there is nothing in front of us, except the prospect of being ousted eventually by a younger woman, who will be content to take a lower wage because the twin flames of Hope and Enthusiasm—excuse my burst into blank verse!—have not yet been extinguished. There is no promotion in the war which is waged by employers against women's labour in the markets of the world; there is only discharge. Nothing is expected of us; why should we seek to accomplish anything? That's how I feel, and all the heads in our place know it, and not one of them ever blames me for it, or expects any of the staff to feel otherwise."

"I don't wonder that you hear such awful things about the morality of business," said Lesley.

CHAPTER VI

MAJOR WAUGH'S MAGNUM OPUS

ON the night before Lesley had dined with Verity and Captain and Mrs. Kinninmont—Kinninmont was a Grenadier—at the "Ritz," and gone on to the Guards' Ball, where they had all four been included in a large supper-party at which some of the beautiful and famous people of the day sat down. Lesley was conscious that she was looking her best, and Verity had foregone most of his dances in order that Captain Kinninmont might introduce his brother officers. Everything had passed off without a hitch. It was one of the most delicious and exciting evenings in Lesley's life, but it left her exhausted for the next day. And when she reached home she found a note from Major Waugh asking her to call at nine a.m. to show him the copying she had done, and hear his scheme for the book.

Buckingham Palace Road is a long way from Notting Hill, and she overslept herself so badly that, though she went without her breakfast, she was very late. Her head ached with the rush and the want of sleep, her feet were tired and swollen, and she had a huge parcel of manuscript to carry with her.

It would have rested her to go in a taxi, but she had spent all her spare money on the etceteras of her dress for the ball: altogether she felt out of sorts, and out of humour with life.

She was half an hour late: Major Waugh did not reproach her, but he told her that it did not matter till she was nearly frantic. He still fancied himself good at sport though he was tottering, and he was attired in a knickerbocker suit with loud checks, and stocking-tops to match the iridescent red of his tie; this also aggravated Lesley, who hated incongruities.

He led the way to his library and grumbled at the knots of her parcel instead of cutting them; he would not let her untie it, and all the time he explained the hitch, which she should have used, in his jerky, incoherent way.

Finally the Gordian knots yielded, and he opened the first note-book. They were, fortunately, plainly marked; this saved some delay and discussion, and she had a neat and clear form of transcribing letters; but her pretty and characteristic handwriting rather puzzled him, and he was too vain to use his glasses before her. He could just see to read by holding out the manuscripts at arm's length, and, doing that, he started to go through all she had written, with a succession of stumbles and grunts. Lesley had never heard anyone read so badly, and the earlier letters were perfectly futile and bald; they reported no incident; they were all "Your excellency," and "I have the honour." But he ploughed steadily through them.

She would not have minded so much, if he had invited her to smoke or inquired if she had breakfasted, and, being answered in the negative, given her tea and bread and butter while he was making a morning service of her manuscript. She longed for anything to occupy her fingers, while her mind was being bored. But no indulgence was forthcoming until, finally, in spite of her efforts to keep awake, she fell fast asleep.

It was the best part of an hour before he discovered it, and it took him several minutes to wake her. The only means which struck him as sufficiently polite was a volley of loud ahem! coughs, but it was so much the kind of noise that he was accustomed to make, that she slept on until he kicked a chair over in his vain efforts.

Then she awoke, covered with confusion, and made her

apologies with such a charming frankness that he became oppressively sympathetic, and, to relieve the monotony, set forth the scheme of his book.

How it differed from other schemes she was never to find out, unless he meant to print everything which had ever been written about Australia, and preserved. He was so long in clearing away the preliminaries and in telling her of the materials which he had collected that he never approached the headings of his scheme.

As he warmed to his subject he took down volume after volume of those uniform manuscript books, in which he had transcribed the results of his own researches. He brought them over to Lesley to point things out ; she was grateful that he did not ask her to transcribe them or read them to him. With their flourishes and abbreviations they were worse than any manuscript in the Colonial Office. He called the Governor the " Gr.," and a Colonel a " Cl.," and the King " His My." Finally the dressing-bell for luncheon sounded and he departed, after ringing for a maid to whom he gave embarrassing directions for her convenience. The maid said that she would bring up her lunch when she sounded the bell again.

Lesley wondered why he could not have asked her down to take lunch with him, if he intended to give it to her ; she did not understand the Ethics of Employment, but she was devoutly thankful that he did not invite her ; it was such a mercy to get away from his voice for a while. He was perfectly amiable, but he could not help barking like a dog who is starting out for a walk, and looking at her with his head down.

In the afternoon the same sort of thing went on till five ; they did not have afternoon tea.

She arrived home thoroughly worn out, and telegraphed to Verity not to call for her in the evening.

She was glad that she had done so, for, after dinner, Ken Western came in, and she was able to pour out her indignation to him. He advised her to " bottle " it up.

" Does he pay you regularly ? " he asked.

"Yes, I get a cheque every Monday morning."

"Sent off on Sunday?" he asked in surprise.

"No. It always has a Saturday postmark. I have noticed that."

"Is he troublesome about your work? Does he find fault with it?"

"He never saw it till to-day, and he said it was quite right, though he had great difficulty in understanding my writing—poor dear!"

"Was he horrid to you in any way?"

"Horrid?"

"I mean did he try to presume—hold your hand—lay a fatherly hand on your shoulder—'my dear' you—pay you compliments—ask you to dine with him?"

"He didn't even ask me to lunch with him, but sent it up to me as if I had been a dressmaker. He was as frightened of me as if I *had* been a dressmaker," she added, as an idea struck her.

"My dear Lesley, go on with him as long as you can: I assure you that this is an ideal post."

"But he is such a bore."

"Thank God for bores. There are still some of them who don't get their value for their money."

"That's impossible."

"Wait until you've seen life a little closer."

"I'm sick of having to work!" cried Lesley.

"Ah!" said Ken, "You have come to that already, have you?"

"What do you mean? I don't think you're a bit sympathetic to-night, Ken!"

Lesley's voice sounded thin and flat. She was thoroughly tired out, and was suffering from reaction after the exhilaration of the Guards' Ball. Ken realized how highly-strung her nerves were; she was standing by the fireplace with one foot on the fender. Now she leaned both elbows on the high mantelpiece and, supporting her face in her hands, looked gloomily into the glass: they were not in the big drawing-room upstairs but in a cosy little morning-room on the ground floor, where the kind-hearted

manageress of the Club sometimes let the members entertain guests.

Ken rose without a word and drew a deep arm-chair up to the fire and collected some cushions from the sofa.

"You're tired out," he said. "Come and sit here: I want you to try one of my new cigarettes. They were a present, and I'm rather pleased with them."

He lit her cigarette and saw that she was quite comfortable before he returned to his seat.

"I'm sorry I was cross," said Lesley penitently. "You are a dear, Ken, to know that it was tiredness."

Ken smiled his slow gentle smile.

"I'm not really unsympathetic," he said, taking up the conversation where they had left off. "I have been wondering ever since we met in London when you would begin to feel the hardship of work. So far it has all been very easy for you, and it has all been a novelty, a sort of game, such as the rich young man plays when he pretends to be an artist in the *Quartier Latin*, or a rich girl plays when she furnishes a jolly little flat in Town, and goes in for journalism, or acting, or running an antique shop. They take themselves seriously; they call themselves workers, but they don't understand the meaning of the word. It's very different for people like ourselves, who have no home to fall back upon, no comfortable balance at the bank to draw on. Sooner or later, we have to understand our position and face, with what courage we can muster, the greyness and monotony of working eight or more hours a day for five days out of the seven, and four hours on the sixth, with the prospect of a bare fortnight's consecutive holiday in the whole year. And it doesn't much matter whether the work is congenial or not in the long run, because for most of us the real hardship is not so much the having to do this work or that, but the having to do it every day and for always."

"But it's worse for women than men."

"I don't see why it should be."

"Because in nine cases out of ten they are doing work, for which by nature they are quite unsuited."

"So are many men: look at myself for instance!"

"Oh, I know. But then it was man who worked as the wage-earner from the beginning of the world; he was bred for it. He goes down into the treadmill every day with courage to persevere, his inheritance from millions of ancestors who have also earned their wage. The monotony of daily work is distasteful to us all, men and women. But after all, by the laws of physiology it is man's natural sphere, therefore he can never feel that deadly loathing of it which causes the heart of the working woman to rebel. '*Le bonheur, c'est de mettre son cœur du côté de son devoir.*' Well, that may be possible for a man, but Christ has said, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,' and the treasure of womanhood is not to be found in marts and the busy centres of traffic."

"The tragedy is that so many women have to work," said Ken. "Now you can understand, surely, why I felt bitter about your father that night at the Aylmers."

"I'm beginning to understand," said Lesley. "I was, as you say, fresh to the life then, but you can't go about the streets of London and eat your meals in her cheap restaurants without reading the tragedy which is written on most of her women's faces. People who don't know anything about the question run away with the idea that women want to work so as to buy independence. My experience of this Club has taught me that, in the great majority of cases, they don't. The bitter truth is that we are not needed anywhere. The work we do is done as well, with less heart-breakings, by girls who are brought up to work, trained to it, girls who work not because their parents have failed, but because their parents expect them to work, just as they themselves do. I suppose that there are thousands of women in London to-day like myself, who have been thrust untrained into the sphere of work—the Legion that never was 'listed, in truth. And however cruel it may sound, when we look facts in the face we must confess that we are the Weeds in the social garden, the superfluous women, the unnecessary ones."

"You're not one of them; you'll marry of course."

"Why of course? I hate being taken for granted in this fashion. You forget that I live in a Club which numbers among its residents forty or more unmarried women whose ages range between twenty-five and fifty. Besides I'm not sure that I want to marry, and in any case I don't intend to look upon marriage as a last refuge from work, an institution by means of which I can get free board and keep, in return for services rendered. At the present moment I feel as if I shall go on searching through the records of the Colonial Office for the rest of my natural life!"

Ken laughed. "You sound gloomy! But I know that it's been a trying day for you. Still, matters might be worse; if you were his secretary you know, you would have to work with him every day!"

"I'd rather starve."

"You haven't tried starving yet."

Something told her that he had, and her retort was stopped by a lump in her throat.

"But there's one thing worse than starvation," he said almost fiercely.

"What's that?"

"Falling into the hands of the rich chaps who hang about Bohemian gatherings to tempt girls, who do not have too much pleasure in their lives."

"You mean Clarence Verity," she said, with a fighting light coming into her eyes.

"Not if he's all right, and you're the best judge of that. But I must say that I wish I was as certain of your friend Miss Openshaw, as I am of you."

"What do you mean, Ken? Agnes hardly knows Clarence Verity."

"Possibly. Certainly I have never seen her in the same room with him, except the other night when you were both at the Kilpins together. But she goes about far too much with that Mr. Illington, who is avowedly what they called in the old days, 'a man of pleasure.'"

Lesley certainly did not care for what she knew of

Dolly Illington, much as an athletic woman like herself was compelled to admire his physique.

She had seen him play polo at Cannes more than once as a member of the famous Old Oxonian team, a singularly dashing horseman with a noble seat, and, when the game was over and he came into the pavilion in his long, lean brown riding-boots, his faultlessly-cut riding-breeches, and with his shirt open at the neck, showing the strong muscles of his sunburnt throat, he looked a splendid type of graceful and wiry manhood.

She had seen him on the polo field and seen him at a Covent Garden ball, and at both his iron-grey eyes seemed to regard the world with contemptuous indifference. The idea that she formed of him at Covent Garden was that he was only waiting for the respectable women to disappear to be a Roman Emperor.

But she took up the cudgels for her friend.

"Don't be old-fashioned, Ken! Besides, I can't have you saying these things about Agnes."

"Am I a scandal-monger? Is it at all like what you know of me?" demanded Ken, hurt by her manner.

"Of course not! Please forgive me! I know you wouldn't do such a thing."

"I may be wrong about Illington, but it sickens me to see these men coming to places like the Aylmers', as they go to the stage door. You know that men and women can't play with fire without burning their fingers."

"No one need burn their fingers at the sacred flame of friendship."

"That may be. But men and women lost the right of warming themselves at the fire of friendship when the Angel barred the Gate of Paradise with the flaming sword of Sex."

CHAPTER VII

THE QUESTION OF WAYS AND MEANS

THOUGH Lesley had met Ken Western with indignant refutations, she was really disquieted, and evaded all Clarence Verity's invitations, and declined to go in his car to at-homes. Where they were distant as in the North or North-West suburbs, or at Chiswick and Richmond, they were quite a tax on her purse; and she invariably had to leave and catch the last train before they were at their best, since it is the habit of successful people to go to a dinner-party or a theatre to brace themselves up for being lionized at an at-home.

But two or three Sundays later, when she had been playing a round in the morning at Ranelagh with Mark Aylmer, and went in to lunch with him and his wife, she found Verity of the party, and a foursome arranged for her in the afternoon with him and the Aylmers. And worse still the Aylmers challenged them, which meant that he was to be her partner. This was Marian Aylmer's doing.

"I say, Mrs. Aylmer," he had said to her, "I've been banished."

"From her presence?"

He nodded.

"You've done something—made love to her perhaps—and I told you that she wouldn't stand it."

"No, I'll swear I haven't. I've been extra careful."

"Will you really swear?"

"I give you my word of honour."

"Then I'll help you." She knew his story and was sorry for him. "You'd better lunch with us on Sunday at Ranelagh: she's having a round with Mark in the morning, and going to stay on."

But though Lesley was put out at finding that Verity was one of the party, she did not let it appear; there was an element of glad surprise in her greeting.

"We've challenged you to play a foursome," said Marian.

"Oh, so we have," rejoined Mark; "well, we'll take a stroke from you, thanks."

Lesley was not technically reserved during lunch: she reflected that it would not be comfortable for the Aylmers to whom she owed so much pleasure. And, after all, Verity had committed no offence, he merely stood for an objectionable practice, of which he might not be guilty, though in fact he was to a certain extent.

But she exhibited none of the franknesses which were peculiarly her own, and talked to him quite staidly, as they sauntered up to the tee.

"The men must take the first drive," cried Mrs. Aylmer. "I can't bear driving from this tee, with all those caddies, like crows on a fence, watching for foozles."

"Go ahead, Verity: it's your side's honour after the exhibition Miss Brydges gave me this morning."

"What shall I take?" he asked the caddie.

"The driver, sir: very few reach the green."

Clarence Verity was determined that he would: so he accumulated force with the penduluming employed by Scottish players for the purpose.

Then he drew back with a mighty swing, using all his weight and height.

"Good ball," said the caddie mechanically.

But as it flew to the left of the twin trees, which stand in front of the green and guard the hole from any other approach, the caddies and the players alike began to shade their eyes with their hands.

"He's done it," pronounced the caddie.

"Done what?"

"Driven into the Thames like Mr. Hambro'."

Verity turned round to Lesley for her approval: it was a mighty stroke: she gave him a golfer's smile of appreciation.

But the caddie said, "Pity it didn't hit the fence and come back; you'll have to drop and lose one, Miss."

"I don't mind losing twenty for a shot like that."

And Mrs. Aylmer said, "Really, Clarence, you mustn't do these things; you destroy my peace of mind."

Lesley said nothing, but she spent the rest of the game in straining every nerve to play up to her partner, taking his advice like a child.

And after tea, she quietly slipped away with him into a corner of the Chinese drawing-room, where they could talk in a low voice and yet listen to the strains of the orchestra of Chocolate Soldiers who were playing in the winter-garden of the mellow old red brick house, behind which the seven conspirators met to invite William of Orange, of glorious memory, to rescue England from a tyranny like that of to-day.

Lesley told herself that a man who could hit like Clarence must be a straight, clean-living man. It did not follow, but she believed that it did, and he wore his honours like a sportsman.

And so it came about that he was readmitted to all his privileges of escorting her, and devising entertainments for her: they had the elevating bond of mutual respect.

So the days slipped by, and March lengthened into April. Lesley's clothes began to look shabby in the pitiless sunlight. Up to now she had been content with renovating her beautiful evening frocks; her coats and skirts, bought from the Roman branch of a well-known Parisian firm, had carried her well through the winter. Now she was faced with the necessity of replenishing them, and she was appalled by the idea. You have to think twice about buying the cheapest of garments when your entire income consists of two pounds a week, the bulk of which goes in board and lodging and laundry.

"What am I to do for clothes, Agnes?" she asked one day when she had gone straight from the Colonial Office to the Maison Tarobert to fetch Agnes. The girls were walking down Bond Street together and were going to stroll in the Green Park before they went back to the Club for dinner: it was the only chance they had of knowing that the spring had come—all seasons are the same in the Wilderness of Brick and Mortar.

"It's no use asking me, my dear, I haven't a decent clo' to my back."

"Oh, Agnes! And you know that you always look absolutely 'right.' How do you do it?"

"Debts," answered Agnes laconically.

"Are you in debt?"

"Of course I am; you can't dress unless you do get into debt. Why, see what a comparatively short time it is since you came to London, but already your dresses are falling to pieces and your silk stockings are either 'laddered' or else darned so far up the back of the heel that it is a perfect farce to wear them."

Lesley laughed. "Mine are," she confessed, "but yours are all right!"

"I am in debt," repeated Agnes.

"Well, I can't get into debt," said Lesley. "To begin with, even if I tried, the shops wouldn't give me credit, with no balance at the bank, and no trade references."

"I suppose not; but I don't owe money to the shops, except the people at Tarobert's, and they know it'll get paid some day. Dolly lends it to me."

"Oh, Agnes!"

"Yes, and very good of him it is!"

Lesley said nothing; they were in Piccadilly now, waiting for the stream of traffic to let them cross over to the Green Park, and she was glad that conversation was difficult for the moment; she was more shocked than she liked to own.

"Well?" queried Agnes when they were away from the roar of Piccadilly behind the railings of the Park.

"I was wondering whether it *is* very good of him."

"Of course it is!"

"But, Agnes, what's the use of running up a bill with him? If you can't pay for the things now, you never will be able to pay for them, and meanwhile the bill gets bigger and bigger and—well, I'm perfectly certain that Dolly isn't an angel!"

"Lesley, don't preach at me! I can't stand it—not at this end of the day." Agnes stopped in the middle of the path and faced round. "Do you think that I'm not running straight? If you do, please go on by yourself, and don't walk with me any more. If you don't, talk to me like a sensible being, instead of a penny-in-the-slot machine for morals, because, really, I'm most horribly worried." Her voice ended on a hollow note like a frightened child's.

"About Dolly?"

"Yes."

They walked on in silence for a while. Then Agnes began to speak.

"It wouldn't matter if I didn't care for him. But I do. I don't know that it's the real big thing which novelists write about—I don't believe I'm capable of that sort of emotion, but I do know that I can fill some sort of gap in Dolly's life just as he can fill a gap in mine. It's the attraction of type I suppose. I knew there was danger from the first moment we met; there are certain men and women who ought never to look deep into each other's eyes. But I couldn't resist playing with the delicious fire of sex-attraction. And now I have burnt my fingers. I can't bear the thought that Dolly may go out of my life; that's what frightens me, because I know that Dolly will not run straight with me. Why should he? From his point of view, or at any rate from the point of view of his family, I'm only a girl for him to amuse himself with—a worker, a sort of typist—even if they knew me by my name they would only think of the scandal that was attached to it."

"But, Agnes, are you sure? It's so obvious that

Dolly is awfully fond of you ; I don't see any reason why he shouldn't ask you to marry him."

"You don't know Dolly as well as I know him."

"Of course not. But if you think he is like that, if you believe he would do—what you suggest, I can't credit that you really love him. Surely you can't even respect him."

"You don't understand," said Agnes. "I don't know that I do respect him, but then, in my belief, half the married women in the world don't respect their husbands, though they love them. Am I a child for you to think that because I care for him I must make him a peg to hang all the virtues upon ! I know that he is a hard liver and a hard drinker, just as he is a hard rider, that he is selfish, extravagant, reckless and rather vicious. Believe me, I am not blind to any of his faults, but I could not bear to lose him nevertheless."

"Oh, Agnes, why ever did you let him lend you money ?"

"It was so simple at the beginning ; I forget how it happened exactly. He wanted me to go to some races or something, and I hadn't a decent dress. I told him that I couldn't. When he knew the reason he said, 'What rot ! Go and buy one !' It was out of the question in the state of my finances that week, though I was meaning to set to work about a frock sometime that month when I had saved a little. He laughed the whole thing to scorn, when I explained the trouble, and insisted on advancing the money to me. I could pay it back the next week or the week after, he said. And then it happened again and again—you know how much I go about with him ; and he's as particular about clothes as a woman, and always wants me to be well-dressed."

"I am rather frightened about it," said Lesley. "I wish I had the money to lend you."

"The money isn't the worst part."

"No, but it complicates matters."

"You mustn't worry ; I'll try and pay it off. I meant to settle up with Taroberts—they've been worrying me

about my bill there lately—but I'll go slow and settle up with Dolly first. As for the other thing—Heaven knows I mean to run straight."

"If you can!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I am afraid for you, Agnes, because it seems to me that it is out of your province now to say if you will run straight or not. It is in Dolly's hands whether or no you make the biggest mistake in your life."

"Thank you!" said Agnes. "You don't give me credit for much character, my dear. But I don't mean to do it, although I don't agree with you that it would be the biggest mistake in my life."

"It would be. You are too good for that sort of thing, Agnes. Besides, it would be so awful when the real thing came along, and you were not able to take it."

"The real thing! Oh, Lesley, Lesley, if you say that in all seriousness you had better go back to your life of dreams in Italy! The real thing doesn't come to us working women, not once in a hundred times. I used to think that it did, but it is long ago since I gave up wondering if it was worth while waiting for the impossible ideal to come along. Now I know that it is best to take what good the Gods send you! I ask you what chance have I had to meet it. In the Maison Tarobert where love is measured by money-bags, do you think? Or in the supper-rooms of the 'Ritz' and the 'Savoy'? You don't meet the best sort of man there, the sort of man who is likely to slip easily into the niche which we all reserve for our ideal. Lots of men have asked me to marry them—lots. And you don't know how hard I have tried to love them as they said that they loved me. That's why I've been engaged so many times."

"You ask too much of human nature," said Lesley.

"I don't mean to! I suppose I'm one of the Idealists. Haven't you noticed that most of the men, and many of the women, who don't marry are idealists. That's their stumbling-block; that is why they have the reputation of falling in love so often. They are always falling in

love with their ideals and always being disappointed. The real lover of human nature mates easily; he only needs someone with an ordinarily nice mind and heart, and the usual share of physical attractions, and, if this person loves him, he is satisfied. But I believe you can have the Artistic Temperament in the Court of Love just as you have it in the Realm of Art and Literature. You think I can't fall in love because I ask too much of human nature. On the contrary I feel very humble about myself. I don't at all feel that I am worthy of the people who love me: certainly I am not worthy of their devotion."

"Why don't you think of what you have to give instead of what they are trying to give you?"

"When I look into my heart, it doesn't seem to me as if I had anything to give," said Agnes.

"You have everything, if you only knew it," said Lesley, to whom Agnes, in spite of her peccadilloes, was an ideal type of womanhood. She was so gallant in her bearing and so great-hearted.

"Well, I've tried over and over again to settle down. But I can't. And it isn't as if I were a romantic girl looking for a Sir Galahad. I am a woman, quit long ago of girlish fancies; and a woman can make a hero of such an ordinary fellow. You know what Wells says about marriage, don't you? 'Look at the things a nice girl will marry . . . cheerfully, proudly! For the sake of the home and the clothes. . . . All about us we see girls and women marrying ugly men, dull and stupid men, ill-tempered, dyspeptic wrecks, sickly young fools, human rats!' And do you know why they are proud to do it, *vide* Wells? Because if they don't they have such an awful life of it unless they have lots of money. Women, even women who have leisurely homes, get to an age when they are not so particular, what can you expect, then, from the women who have to work! But I can't do that! To me marriage without love seems worse than prostitution—I'm certain it's not any better. It's different with Dolly. Really, I believe that, if there is a God, he would be better pleased if I lived with Dolly,

feeling as I do about him, 'without benefit of clergy' than if I married a man whom I did not love just for the sake of the home and the easy life he had to offer me. There's more beauty in the first if there is more danger."

"Aren't you mistaking passion for Love?"

Agnes was silent for a moment. "Perhaps I am," she said briefly, at last.

"I think it was Hubert Bland who said, 'Passion can never be mistaken for Love because Love always wants to give and Passion to take!' or words to that effect," said Lesley.

"Nevertheless it is second nature with Passion to masquerade as Love," answered Agnes. "And whatever it is, it's the high romance of life. I read somewhere the other day that 'no theory of life is worth having which proposes to exclude adventure and laughter and danger.' Don't ask me to rule them out!" Agnes was smiling now. Having shifted the responsibility of her trouble by talking about it, her good spirits had come back again. But Lesley took the affair more seriously.

"I wish you could get away for your holidays or something," she said, "then you would see the thing more plainly."

"I don't want to see it more plainly. It's as plain as a pikestaff. It's only when I stop to think that I am afraid. That's why I racket about so much and get into debt, because in my heart of hearts I am a coward. It's my way of singing in the dark, as some people do when they go into a lonely room and have to fumble about for matches, because they are frightened of the Thing they may come up against. I am smitten with the fear that Dolly will get tired of me and leave me in the wilderness of unwanted womanhood, to shrivel and fade like all those poor weeds at the Club!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE HIGH ROAD TO SUCCESS IN JOURNALISM

ALL through April, the month of song and laughter, Lesley went each morning to the Colonial Office, except for one much-dreaded day in every fortnight, when she took the materials she had collected to Major Waugh, and endured the tedium of his reading them aloud to her. Clarence Verity was often waiting for her in his great Daimler, when she came out into Whitehall, and they slipped away for a run in the country, dining when the mood took them, in whatever inn was near at hand, and coming back close upon midnight. This was the result of a strategic movement on Clarence's part.

After her talk with Agnes in the Green Park Lesley began to think seriously about her own affair with Clarence. Ken's warning, half-forgotten up to now, recurred to her mind. Every woman believes in the efficacy of Platonic friendship until she has disproved it, and Clarence Verity never showed by word or action, except by his obvious pleasure in her society, that he had any feeling towards her except the most platonic friendship. Lesley herself was as heartwhole as a boy. She took a frank pleasure in his society, and she was fond of him; it was natural; he was a nice man and persistently kind to her. Also she was grateful that he had not spoilt their friendship by attempting a flirtation. But, though there seemed to be no danger, she made another effort to stem the tide

of intimacy by again declining invitations to the distant at-homes which made the freely-offered use of Clarence's car a real service. And she definitely refused his blandishments for dances or theatres beyond the regulation one night a week. He had enough intuition to guess what was passing through her mind, and instead of worrying her, quietly set himself to find out what would give her more pleasure than the inevitable supper-parties, which had proved so unwearyingly welcome to the other girls whom he had met and cultivated in Bohemia.

It transpired by chance. As he was motoring back from playing golf at Sudbrook Park, he met her toiling on foot up Richmond Hill; the men with whom he had been playing were with him, so he could not stop; Lesley did not see him though the car passed close beside her in the narrow street. But next morning he rang her up before she left the Club to ask if she would let him run her out to Epping Forest that evening. "It's going to be a topping day, and there will be a moon. I'll call for you at the Colonial Office at five and we'll go out and dine at a ripping little place in the Forest which I know of, and I'll get you back to the Club before the latch-key hour!"

Lesley demurred, though her spirits rose at the idea.

"Do come," urged Clarence, and prompted by his good genius, or perhaps by the Devil, added: "I know you'll love the Forest just now in all its fresh spring green!"

"Oh, I must come!" cried Lesley warmly, hardly knowing whether she was more pleased at the promised treat, or at the spirit which had prompted it.

That was the first of many rides. "What made you think of it?" cried Lesley jubilantly as the great car hummed its way past the last ugly row of houses and faced the open country. "I've been starving for this! Never in my life have I missed the seasons as you miss them in London. What is the good of April if you can't have the joy of watching the miracle of growing things?"

"I just thought of it," said Clarence in his boyish way,

carefully hiding his delight at the success of his plans. For a second time Lesley was off her guard.

Then one morning towards the end of the month she received a letter which humiliated as well as dismayed her. It was from Major Waugh's housekeeper.

"MDM.,

"I am sorry to have to inform you that the Major is dead. As he thought it might inconvenience you having your work stop suddenly he signed the cheque (enclosed) for you before he died.

"Yours obediently,

"ELIZA BENNETT."

Lesley dropped a tear over his thoughtfulness; she was to have dined that night with Clarence Verity, and gone with him to the great Gainsborough ball at the Albert Hall, but she had no heart for it, so she begged him to take Agnes, for whom Dolly Illington had been besieging heaven and earth to get tickets, suddenly remembered when too late. Lesley went round to the florist's and spent a pound of the twenty in ordering a wreath of the most expensive white flowers for her benefactor's funeral, and 'phoned to Ken Western at the office begging him to come and see her, and advise her what to do, as she was out of work.

Ken came and filled her with hope. "You ought to have no trouble in getting as much work as you like," he said, "I'll write round to the editors I know."

But he had over-estimated her chances; the burden of all their replies was the same. "What experience has she had? We are besieged with offers from ladies, well-educated, well-dressed and well-mannered, who are willing to take any work we offer them, however petty and disagreeable. But the work of that kind which we have to offer is all disposed of. Such and such a post is vacant, but it is so responsible that we must have a trained journalist for it." Ken had a shrewd idea that, if he took Lesley to call on them, she would get work in more than

one quarter from editors, who would enjoy having anyone so attractive in their employ. But he dared not propose it, nor would Lesley have listened to him.

"As you have a little money in hand to tide you over, something is sure to turn up, so I shouldn't worry," he said over the telephone, when Lesley rang him up one day after about a week of fruitless effort; "it's only when you have no money, and you lose your job, that work is difficult to find!"

Lesley believed him, and allowed herself a thoroughly good holiday, while she waited for something to come —golfing most days and letting Clarence Verity map out her evenings. And Ken went on dropping pearls before editors who were as unappreciative as swine, and gilding the disagreeable truth for her in every way he could think of.

After about a fortnight, during which she made no serious effort to find work, she decided that nothing was coming. She began to scan the advertisement columns of the *Daily Telegraph* rather anxiously. She consulted her friends at the Club, and following their advice, gave up her golf and hired a Remington machine to teach herself typewriting. She would have liked to take a secretarial course, or better still a course of training at one of the Schools of Journalism, of which she heard from girls who were working in Fleet Street, but she had no money in the world except the remains of the twenty-pound cheque, the writing of which had been almost the last conscious act of kind-hearted Major Waugh. Ken was in despair of softening the hearts of any editors he knew, and Lesley herself was beginning to grow anxious, when one morning, while she was scanning the advertisement sheet of the *Telegraph* before she settled down to a long day's work on her machine, she came upon the words:

"Required immediately, by editor of weekly topical paper, young lady of good appearance for secretarial work and reporting. Knowledge of typewriting essential."

Applicants for work rush in where angels fear to tread. Lesley's knowledge of typewriting was of the slenderest; she had acquired a certain proficiency on her Remington, but she had the vaguest notion of official speeds, and the idea of being dictated to on the machine would have thrown her fingers into a panic of nervousness. However, confident in the little that she knew, she set off at once to interview "X." in his office in Arundel Street, dressed in her neatest suit and a becoming new hat, an extravagance which she had not been able to resist in her fortnight of holiday-making.

It was May, and London had the festive air it always wears at the beginning of the season. Lesley's spirits rose as she saw the fluttering pennons of Pall Mall, and not even the Strand, whose crowded pavements are one of the least pleasant spots in London for women, damped her ardour. She was too busy with her thoughts and pleasant anticipations to care if she was jostled or stared at. She pictured to herself how delighted Ken would be to hear that she had managed, all by herself, to get a footing on the ladder of journalism, which is to many of the ambitious seekers after fortune as great a lodestar as the stage. For the same reason—it is a short cut to fame; you hear of so-and-so who makes three hundred a year by writing short stories—"He polishes them off in a few minutes, while he is shaving, and then he is his own master," just as you hear of actresses whose working day, often highly paid, seems to last for a mere three hours. You must stand with your foot on the bottom rung of the ladders of Journalism and the Stage to know the truth of those statements.

"X.," the editor of *Last Week*, whose advertisement being translated meant office-drudge when there was no reporting to be done, determined to engage her at a fair salary as soon as he saw her. Mr. Bayswater believed in paying his employees well and working them to death. He also believed in pretty women. Lesley disliked him cordially "at sight." He was a well-dressed, clean-shaven Jew, who would have been quite good-looking

but for his fleshiness and the nostrils, by which his people might be recognized as easily as by the seal which they are to have set on their foreheads, at the Resurrection. He also had sleepy, slitty, Oriental eyes which looked at women horribly: all the time Lesley was in his office they never left her face. She was rather disconcerted, too, by the fire of business questions which he opened on her after he had motioned her to a seat. He did not rise from his chair when she came in, nor did he take his cigarette from his lips; he just raised his head and stared. Lesley stated her errand; he was so long in replying that she thought he had not understood what she was saying.

"I am afraid that I have not enough experience," said she nervously, when he had finished his questions.

"You have no experience," he corrected gravely.

"Then I won't waste your time any longer," said Lesley, feeling restive under his persistent gaze, and rather thankful at heart that she was not to be engaged. She got up.

Meyer Bayswater did not move. "Sit down again," he drawled, "there's no possible hurry. I was going to say that, though you have no experience, I am willing to give you a trial. You say that you type: I won't inquire into your speed, but if it isn't good, please try to improve it during this week; go to Pitman's school or something of the sort. To-day is Tuesday: on Saturday they will be playing the croquet championship at the Roehampton Club. I want you to go there and interview Lady Travis, who is running it. You may find some difficulty in getting in, but that is your affair—a reporter should be able to pass anywhere. When you have got your 'copy,' write it up and bring it to me on Monday morning. If that is satisfactory, I will engage you at a pound a week with a commission on all copy that you bring me, and I print, and I will raise your salary when I find that you are of real use to me."

Lesley did not breathe freely until she was down the dark stairs and out in the street: she did not like the dingy little office of *Last Week*. Meyer Bayswater

occupied the inner of two rooms across the passage from his staff, who were left without supervision except for an eagle-eyed criticism of their "copy." It was putting them, in a way, on their honour, and they liked it; they were also proud of the name which his thoroughness had won for the paper. What they hated was having to work with him, for the door of his outer room was closed with a spring lock, which he could open by a lever beside the table where he sat, and he only opened it when the person who wished to enter had stated his business to the clerks, and they had submitted the application on the telephone. If he said "send him," the lever opened the door.

This method might impress male visitors, but it made some ladies very glad to get out without unpleasantness, though this did not often happen, for Mr. Bayswater was a shrewd judge of character and mood, and could generally avoid offering his attentions where they would not be understood.

When Saturday came round, Lesley, who had asked Agnes to telephone to Dolly for a voucher for Roehampton, went down to the club and had her first experience as a reporter. She found it shy work and she left as soon as she had achieved her interview. She had often been to Ranelagh with the Aylmers and had enjoyed her visits there immensely, but she found it depressing to walk about Roehampton by herself, with not a soul to speak to. She did not stay to watch the polo, or even to have tea. But she was more successful than she had hoped to be in her interview, and made notes for enough material to write up a good article.

Meyer Bayswater read it through without comment. When he had finished it he said, "This will do," and added, "You had no difficulty in getting in, then?"

"No," said Lesley in surprise.

"Good." He did not ask if she had been given a voucher, and she saw no reason why she should tell him.

Meyer Bayswater admired Lesley at a glance, and knew that hers was a type which grows on you. He also knew that it was a type which requires playing with as much

vigilance as a two-pound trout. When he sent for her, the other clerks in the office smiled behind her back, but she found him a model of discretion. He had hit upon an admirable idea for benefiting his paper and gratifying his eyes simultaneously. This was the age of personal journalism, and he soon discovered that Lesley had met at the Aylmers' and their friends' houses many of the most interesting personalities of the day in Literature, Art and the Drama, and a few public people, and that she was both observant and critical, if she had no gift of writing effective journalism.

His method was to seat her on the opposite side of his table and ask her if she knew this or the other personage whom he wished to exploit in the coming issue of his paper. If she did, he extracted everything she knew with the ingenuity of an Old Bailey lawyer, and, when he had pumped her dry, he would dictate all the suitable details back again transmuted into brilliant journalism. The minuteness of his memory staggered her. He feasted his eyes on her beautiful, spirited face all the time that he was dictating. She was either unaware of this, or fancied that he only kept his eyes on her to know when she was ready to take down a fresh sentence; for he was most business-like about the dictation. Directly it was over he dismissed her with a few words of commendation for the way in which she had given her information.

The new feature in the paper sent up its circulation, and he raised her salary ten shillings a week, which was very acceptable.

One day, when she had been with him some time, he told her that he had two seats for the Opera and would take her with him to show her how to report an Opera—which, in his paper, was done entirely from the social side. "It's a job you might like very much."

As he had behaved so scrupulously, and she had constantly been to the theatre alone with Clarence Verity, she saw no reason why she should not accept. She observed that he was taking her on a Strauss night, when tickets were scarcest. She was rather afraid that he would

press her to go to supper afterwards, but she had the gratification of finding that the thought never seemed to have occurred to him. All he insisted on doing for her was putting her into a taxi to take her home, because he said it was so late.

At the same time he handed her five shillings.

"This is far too much," she said.

His reply was quite business-like. "I don't know where you live, and you must have enough. You can treat it as *Petty Cash* and *Ex.'s*, if you like."

She had her expenses when she went out reporting, and no reply he could have made would have been so agreeable to her feelings. She would have felt inclined to throw it at him if he had said that it did not matter. She also liked his avoiding to ask her address.

After this she let him take her to entertainments fairly often. He was a far more interesting man to talk to than either Mark Aylmer or Clarence Verity. She liked them immensely as good sportsmen, and men who were kind to her, and never presumed. But their outlook was more limited than hers, though she was younger than Verity, and young enough to be Mark Aylmer's daughter. Mark never happened to take her out without his wife, except to golf, though Marian would have let him go to Paris with her cheerfully, if the occasion had arisen. She was a woman of the broadest mind, and she knew how Lesley's type could be trusted. But Verity had taken her to everything which appealed to her, and which his imagination could suggest.

Meyer Bayswater was tactful in the way in which he played her. He said to her one day:

"You are the best reporter I ever had. You've got in at places where all the people I've sent before have been turned back; you make it pay to do the thing properly. There are houses in Park Lane where you could get in without any card if you drove up in a taxi, properly dressed, and you can cover more ground in the day if you do use a taxi. You can always take one from where the bus puts you down if you've more than five

minutes to walk, or if it's wet enough to spoil your clothes."

She expressed her gratitude charmingly, and a few days later he said, "Lady Deutsch has a big crush this afternoon, and she's awfully troublesome about reporters. You'd better spend five pounds on a hat and gloves and veil and that sort of thing—if it isn't enough you can have what you want more": at the same time he handed her a five-pound note. She put it down on the table.

"I'd rather not, thanks; I don't need it. I've got things which will make me look all right. I naturally don't wear them to the office; I try to make them go as far as I can."

She knew that she was not being truthful. A new hat and accessories were just what she did need, and on her salary, which, even with her commission, never exceeded two pounds a week, she could not at all afford to buy them. But she did not wish to be under any obligation to Meyer Bayswater, and she could not reconcile her conscience to their being entered under the heading of "expenses." She declined with a smile, which had as much firmness as civility about it.

But he was not to be refused.

"My dear girl, don't run away with the idea that I'm trying to give you a present. Wear them for office work only and change them directly you get home, if you feel like that. I'm not offering them to you as a gift, but as —well, call it office furniture. You know you will feel more confidence if you have on a new hat. And it's essential to my business that you should feel confidence."

In her heart Lesley acknowledged the truth of this, but she still hesitated. "You are very kind to want to prevent me feeling awkward; still I'm afraid that your argument doesn't convince me."

Meyer Bayswater became absorbed in his papers. "Take it or leave it, just as you like; I can't waste any more time. The offer was made as a business transaction, and as such you should accept it. Since you choose to make it a personal affair, you can leave it."

Lesley blushed furiously. She felt that she had placed herself in a false position. "I will take it," she said.

She did not like to confess to herself how much she enjoyed choosing a new hat and buying really good gloves again. Mr. Bayswater approved of her purchases, and not a soul in the office dreamed that he had any connection with them. Why should they? Her clothes, though well worn, had obviously been expensive. As she seemed able to go about everywhere, why shouldn't she appear in a new hat without exciting comment?

"You've a nice taste in hats," he said. "I must get you to write a fashion page for me. It will mean a bit more money to you, and the shops will tumble over each other to give you things."

She was earning over three pounds a week now, with expenses extra, and Mr. Bayswater put a liberal interpretation on expenses. The girls at the Club were wildly envious of her.

"You were born under a lucky star, Lesley," said Agnes Openshaw. "It's the softest job I ever heard of. I must say that you do it jolly well; but there are few of these billets going about."

Ken Western did not come to see her at the Club often now: he was a little out of mood with her in these days. He mistrusted Meyer Bayswater. Not that he knew anything against the man's reputation, but he had seen him one day when he looked in at the offices of *Last Week* to speak to Lesley, and he recognized his type. He sounded Lesley on the subject, but she was quite confident, and a little impatient that he did not applaud her success.

"Isn't he pushing you on a bit quickly?" he asked dubiously, when he heard about the editing of the fashion column.

"Yes, of course he is; but I'm not out of my depth yet. Oh, Ken, don't look so serious! Acknowledge that you're glad that I'm on the road to becoming a full-blown editress!"

"Of course I'm glad, and I'm not surprised. Any woman of intelligence could do it when she had mastered the

technicalities of the business: it's merely a matter of getting the job."

Lesley found him uninspiring after Clarence Verity, who was much impressed by her success, and flattered her accordingly.

It was not long after this that Ken Western came to say good-bye. His mother had died, and he was on his way back to his beloved Italy to paint and starve again.

He went out of Lesley's life in the heyday of her success, when she felt safer than ever before in her new life. She did not dream that before a month was out she would be again in need of his sympathy and help. For it was to Ken Western she turned for sympathy, and help in trouble, just as she turned to Clarence Verity for pleasure, when the world was bright.

Mr. Bayswater still filled the pages he wrote in his paper with Lesley's descriptions of well-known people, translated into journalism by himself, so that he might enjoy her society in the office, as well as on the numerous occasions when he took her out. She had dined with him alone several times, and listened to his insidious suggestions that she should have new gloves when she needed them for going about reporting, and put them down as "expenses."

Her reporting under these easy conditions had taken on quite a character, and was a valuable feature of the paper. Hostesses were willing to give special attention and facilities to this pretty, well-bred, well-dressed woman.

In going out to dine or to the play with Mr. Bayswater, getting into and out of cabs with him, and so on, Lesley had gradually and in spite of herself fallen into a certain familiarity of contact with him. It was nothing to feel his hands against her neck as he helped her on with an opera-cloak, or her fingers in his as she stepped out of a taxi.

But he had not made these incidents the vehicles for familiarities; he had not even let her Christian name slip out, until one day, while she was shut in his office with him, he kissed her. She was sitting, with her back to the room, at a small table where the books of reference were kept, looking out the name of a certain celebrity in the pages

of *Who's Who*, when she felt something warm and moist on her neck. At first she did not realize what had happened, and she put up her hand without looking round. It was taken in someone else's, and she started up to find that Meyer Bayswater had come silently across the softly-carpeted floor, and was standing behind her, with a foolish, half-confident smile upon his face. They stood for a second looking at each other, Lesley with her hand on the back of the chair as she had risen. Something in her expression made him back away. The fatuous smile faded from his face. But Lesley saw red. She turned and, seizing her heavy note-book, the first thing that came to hand, flung it straight in his face. The action was so unexpected that he had no time to ward it off, and it struck him on the cheek, leaving an ugly red mark.

Lesley took up her gloves and bag. "Open the door," she said. "I'm going, and I'm not coming back." She spoke very calmly, more quietly than usual, though she was trembling so much that she could hardly stand.

Meyer Bayswater took a step towards her. "You little devil," he said.

But Lesley was too quick for him. Her eye had measured the chances of being able to reach the lever by his table in case of emergencies, and she had her hand on it before he realized what she was going to do.

"All right," he said calmly. "You win." He stooped and picked up the note-book, and the loose sheets which had been scattered from it. His *sang-froid* was admirable. For the first time Lesley found herself able to admire him.

"Do you mean that you're not coming back?"

"Yes."

"Look here, I'll do anything you like, if you'll stay. I'll marry you; I swear I will."

Lesley could have laughed aloud at the colossal vanity of his offer.

"Do you think I'd marry a cur—who has deceived me like this?"

"But I haven't deceived you. I only love you, and it's

the very first time that my love has run away with me; I have kept such a guard upon myself. But you can't blame a man for loving you: you shouldn't be so deuced attractive."

"Is that all you have to say?" demanded Lesley coldly.

"I've a good deal more. You don't think that I engaged you because you were a suitable applicant to fill the post, do you? I engaged you for your looks. Don't be so angry! I've done you a good turn really, because I've taught you the business. I grant that the first moment I set eyes on you I recognized that you were a woman of intelligence, or I wouldn't have risked wasting my time. There isn't a man in Fleet Street who would have given you work on any other grounds, if you had gone to him as you came to me. Why, you hadn't even a speed on the type-writer. That's where you good-looking girls have the pull over the plain ones—you ought never to be out of a job. Look here, I'll make you a business offer—you shall fix your own commission on the stuff you bring in. That's a chance you'll be a fool not to take."

"I don't care," said Lesley. "It makes no difference what you offer; you've made it impossible for me to stay. What have I done that you should think you had a right to insult me, just because I'm in your employ, and you've been kind to me? You have been kind, I admit that. But you can't think how I feel the degradation of a thing like this!"

"Think what it means to me!"

"And to me! I am giving up all I have to live upon. It may be months before I get such a good post again, and you have deprived me of all this by your beastliness."

"I've asked you to marry me."

Lesley put her hand impatiently on the lever. "I don't want to marry you. It's work that I want."

CHAPTER IX

PRIVATE SECRETARY TO AN M.P.

WHEN Clarence Verity heard what had happened he said, "Filthy little cad! Do let me go and kick him. It's worth a ten-pound fine."

But Lesley said: "No, I should hate it; and now that it's all over, I don't think he has behaved badly, according to his lights. Only I couldn't run the risk of his doing it again."

"I should think not! But what are you going to do now, Miss Brydges?"

"Look out for some more work, I suppose."

"I want to say something to you. But first you must promise me not to be offended."

"I shan't promise. I know what you're going to say."

"What am I going to say?"

She wrote something down on a piece of paper and folded it up and handed it to him.

"Now tell me before you read it, and see if I'm right."

"Well, I was going to say—bother! I don't know how to put it!"

"That's not what I wrote down," said Lesley, laughing, in spite of herself, at his embarrassment.

"I know. That's not what I was going to say: I was going to say—oh, you know, you've written it down!"

"Yes, but you mustn't read it till you have said," persisted Lesley unmercifully.

"Well, I was going to say that you're not to bother about money, because I'll be only too grateful to lend you as much as you want till you get into another post."

A smile broke over Lesley's face: it was a charming smile, but there was something whimsical and sardonic about it, as Clarence opened the paper and found that she had guessed right.

"Oh, you ridiculous person, I can't let you do that, thank you very much all the same. I shan't starve, you know. If I'm hungry, I'll ring you up, and you can ask me out to dinner. And my clothes won't drop off my back just yet."

"But there's the rent."

It was really board-money and was the serious feature of the situation.

"I think I can run to that."

"Well, promise to come to me before you are kicked out, for not paying it."

"I promise," she said, laughing.

He went away, silenced. But he was not satisfied, and spent the whole of the next two days in driving round to his friends to see if they wanted a secretary.

Towards the end of the second day he triumphed. One of them did want a secretary. He was a Shropshire M.P., named Ord, who had been at Marlborough with him, and had married Clarence's cousin Bertha, who drew a larger income than himself from their cotton mills. *Salopia Inhospitalis* was written large over the face of Lucas Ord. He was a tall man, with a spare, aristocratic figure. He was good-looking in a way, and quite commanding, with his well-cut, parchment-skinned features and bony nose. He had a cold eye of faded blue, and a fringe of hair with a beautiful wave in it, carried round his head up to the level of his ears. Above that rose a smooth pink hemisphere, large even for a man of his height. It was one of those bald heads which look as if they ought to be divided up with degrees of latitude and longitude; even another wart would have been welcome. Mr. Ord dressed with the precision which is expected of a wooden Member of the House of Commons. He could talk sense in the House, but any

pleasure in his speeches was discounted by the insincerity of his voice, which was his way of implying sarcasm. He was a frigid man, who had never inspired affection in any human being except his wife, the cotton-heiress.

Bertha Ord could only be liked for her money. She had the family rotundity which might have overtaken Verity if he had not remained an athlete. She was detestably selfish, and it was her nature to be rude. She spent great sums on dress which her stumpy figure could not carry off. She had, however, beautiful feet, which were always exceptionally well-shod.

Mrs. Ord engaged her husband's secretaries. She chose them partly for their looks. If they were very pretty and attractive they were better for carrying out presumptuous orders, and she was always giving presumptuous orders. Her idea was that anybody, who could type and hunt up facts in an index, was good enough to do her husband's work, which she regarded as totally unimportant, a hobby for which she was pleased to provide the means, because it brought in its train a certain social prominence. Pretty secretaries were no temptation to Mr. Ord ; he had the blood of a fish. He cultivated an air of humility to them, which he was far from feeling. He was, however, as considerate as his wife would let him be. He dictated everything in her presence, except when she had some thing more engrossing to do. And she would interrupt whatever he was doing, to dictate a letter or order-list of her own. As far as comforts went, she was an excellent hostess : she had a genius for ordering dinners and choice private brands of champagne ; otherwise no one of any importance would have bothered himself with her. She had a stupid country house in Berkshire near the river, and a stupid town house—it had been two houses—in Queen's Gate. And she asked stupid people to both places. She had no desire to be interested or amused : her pleasures were at the table, her recreations in presiding over local charities.

Her children were brought up as prigs. The secretary was expected to assist in this with suggestions as well as

vigilance. She took her meals with the family, not because she was a lady, but to make herself useful, and was sometimes kept so busy with preparing the children's food, that she had no time to eat anything. She was not introduced to guests, but she was expected to try and amuse them.

Lesley was grateful to Clarence Verity for the promptness with which he had come to her assistance. She had not contemplated leaving the Club, and going to live in anyone's house as secretary, and the idea was distasteful to her; but her talks with the women at the Club had filled her with apprehensions about the difficulty of getting work during July, and also the prospect of going away with the Ords to their country house out of the stifling heat of a particularly trying summer in London was a tempting one. The affair was settled quickly: Lesley packed up her boxes, and, leaving the bulk of her luggage in the storeroom of the Club, said good-bye to Agnes, and took a taxi across to the Ords' house in Queen's Gate. She had taken it for granted that, since Mrs. Ord was a cousin of Clarence's, she would be received on the more or less friendly footing she had enjoyed with the Aylmers and their friends. It was not long before she learned that Clarence was not a *persona grata* in his cousin's house, and that Mrs. Ord, though she did not scruple to make use of every moment of their available time, had extremely conventional ideas about the social scale of her dependants.

The salary was a generous one, and Lesley had no expenses whatever, so that for the first time since she came to London she was able to initiate the renewal of her wardrobe. She decided to stay with the Ords at any rate until she could afford to buy the much-needed coat and skirt and evening-dress, which she had been coveting for the last six months. After the gaiety and independence of her life at the Club she found the days intolerably dull. Never having taken a similar post, she did not know that she was entitled to certain hours of freedom from work, just as the servants were entitled to their evenings out, and, indeed, to certain free times during the day. For what butler, or cook, or parlourmaid, or even housemaid

would be content to work unceasingly from the time that she left her bedroom in the morning till the time when she retired to it again at night. If she had really been Mr. Ord's secretary she would of course have had spare moments when he was golfing or in the House. But Mrs. Ord saw to it that, when she was not actually working for her husband, Lesley had more than enough to do to keep her employed.

Clarence, who used to ring her up when he thought the coast would be clear, was frankly indignant. "But you must come out with me!" he used to declare. "If you don't I shall come and kick up the very devil of a fuss about the way they are treating you!" And he would implore her to leave them and find work of a more independent nature. "Don't feel that you ought to stay just because I helped to get the confounded post for you, or because they are relations of mine!" he urged.

In the early days he used to threaten to come round and beard the terrible Bertha in her den, but Lesley begged him not to do anything rash. She would not confess the truth to him, bearing the memory of Agnes and Illington in her mind; and Clarence had not the slightest suspicion that she was enduring the dullness of the days solely for the sake of the money she was able to put by for necessaries. She saw Clarence about once in every ten days; this was part of the truce which she had made with him, not to carry war into the enemy's camp. She was a willing enough worker at first for both the Ords, husband and wife. She liked Lucas Ord, and was prepared to be interested in his work if he had allowed her to be. But when she realized the kind of woman that Mrs. Ord was, and that, the more you did for her the more you had to do, she did not scruple to "ask out," in servants' parlance, every now and again.

Towards Christmas of that year Clarence went away to Switzerland for the winter sports, and the Ords left London for their place in Berkshire. They came back to town the second week in January, because Mrs. Ord was giving a big luncheon party on the 16th. It was a Sunday,

since the Aylmers were to be among the guests, and Sunday was the only day that Marian Aylmer would go out to lunch.

Mrs. Ord, who was clever, though she always chose stupid people for her friends, had discovered the value of the Aylmers. The Duchess of Brighton, for instance, positively refused to go to such dull parties, unless the Aylmers were asked to amuse her. It was Mark Aylmer whom she liked to meet: the Duke had been in the Eleven he captained at Eton, and had never got over his awe for him; and the Duchess loved to hear Mark talk about the way in which the literary and artistic and dramatic celebrities, whom she met at his house, struck him. He was never ill-natured about them: he spoke of them with pure wonder, and he generally refered to them as " birds " with some racy epithet of his own prefixed.

Mrs. Ord had met the Aylmers through her cousin Clarence Verity, and at the Aylmers' house had met her elusive neighbour-on-the-river, the Duchess.

The Duke saw a good deal of Mr. Ord. They worked hard together to combat radicalism in the High Wycombe division, where seating cane-bottomed chairs as a village industry seemed to have implanted revolutionary ideas. The Duchess was notoriously neighbourly, but she never went to the Ords' parties because she had such a dread of being bored.

But after they had met at the Aylmers, Mrs. Ord, when the time came for sending out the next quarterly invitation to the Duchess, made the Aylmers promise to come first, and sent a private note instead of her usual steel-engraved card. The party was described as small, and the fact that the Aylmers would be there was discreetly conveyed. The Duchess came and brought her son, the Marquis of Hove, who was now at Eton and had hopes of the XI. This, of course, had told Mrs. Ord how the attendance of the Duchess was to be secured. But she did not understand Mark Aylmer so well.

On this particular Sunday she had placed him at table between the Duchess and Lesley, so that the Duchess

should have the whole of his conversation. She was aware that Lesley knew the Aylmers, but, because she herself regarded them with a certain amount of awe, as people who were the intimates of the Duchess of Brighton, it never entered her head that Lesley would be on friendly terms with them, or that Mark would condescend to address more than a few words of polite greeting with her husband's secretary, who was not in the drawing-room to be introduced to the guests, and who did not come in till the company were seated, having been employed at the last minute to prepare the salad in the Continental way.

"Hullo, Lesley!" cried Mark genially, as she seated herself beside him, "What are you doing here to-day!" He knew that she was Lucas Ord's private secretary, though she had not come to see them since she went to the Ords. "Why aren't you playing golf!"

Mark's voice reached Mr. Ord's ears, and he adjusted his pince-nez to look at him. Lesley saw that, but she did not mind: she was not frightened of Mr. Ord; but she glanced hurriedly down the table to see if Mrs. Ord had overheard his greeting. She was fortunately engaged with her left-hand neighbour. Lesley turned to Mark in relief.

"Don't talk so loud," she admonished, laughing in spite of herself. "You make me shy. I'm not used to people talking to me at luncheon!"

"What do you mean? And why did you come in late?"

"What a lot of questions! I mean that I'm no longer Lesley Brydges, but *the secretary*. I was late because I was preparing the very excellent salad that you are going to eat in a minute or two. I'm proud of my salads, Mark—this is a real Italian one. And as for the golf, well, I never have any time for that now. I haven't had a game for months!"

"You mean to say that you don't get your Sundays?"

"I don't get any time to myself from ten o'clock in the morning till—well, often two on the next, except

when Mrs. Ord is asleep. Fortunately she does not have her breakfast sent up to her till ten."

"But you're not her secretary, you're Lucas's."

"I'm not her secretary, but I'm her drudge of all work. I do all the things that the servants can't or won't do."

"Good Lord! And how much do you get paid for it?"

Lesley told him.

"Well, that's not so bad as the rest. But I never heard of such an iniquitous imposition! I wonder you haven't left them before this. It isn't anything of a life for a girl like you! What does Clarence think about it?"

Lesley flushed slightly at the suddenness of the question. Truth to tell, she had missed Clarence rather badly since he went away to Switzerland and, only a day or two before, she had had a brief letter from him, for Clarence Verity, like most devotees of sport, was powerless with a pen in his hand, saying that he was going on from Switzerland to the Riviera for some golf. So he had been rather present in her mind.

"He thinks that I ought to have left them long ago; but then, he doesn't understand."

"Doesn't understand what?"

"Oh, finances," laughed Lesley, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Ah, money, money, money!" cried Mark. "It's what we all suffer from, either the lack of it or the superfluity."

"Not the superfluity!"

"Yes, for don't you remember the rich young man who went away sorrowful when he had heard the words of Christ bidding him sell all he had, and give it to the poor, 'for he was one that had great possessions'?"

"He was lacking in heart and spirit," said Lesley.

"I think it shows that he was possessed of intelligence. That he had a heart is proved by the fact that he was moved by the teaching of Christ; it was his intelligence which sent him sorrowful away. He was probably one

of the great idealists of his day, but, as a wise citizen of Judæa, he knew that he would do more harm than good by such rank socialism as selling all that he had and giving it to the poor! But we grow serious! Have you heard what is to be our next move in the search for money-bags?"

"No."

"We're going to toddle off to America!"

"You!"

"Even I! Marian has had such wonderful offers of commissions from people in New York, that we are just shutting up the house in Brook Green, and resigning ourselves to a possible stay of two years on the other side of the Atlantic."

"I suppose I ought to be glad, but I'm sorry."

"D'you know, so am I," answered Mark. "I hate travel."

It was not long before Mrs. Ord's malignant eye discovered that the Duchess was being neglected, as far as Mark Aylmer was concerned. Her other neighbour was only too glad to monopolize her; but her other neighbour happened to be a social reformer with a taste for titles, who liked to be seen talking hard to a Duchess, but had nothing to talk about except his fads. He was another personage difficult to get to a party, and the Duchess had been the bait for him, just as the Aylmers had been the bait for her. She pretended to listen to him, but occupied herself with Mrs. Ord's culinary success as a hostess. It was the first time that she had ever known Mark neglect an elderly woman for a girl's good looks. But she viewed the matter with her wide tolerance, "He must be far gone, poor dear," she said to herself, "and she is very good-looking."

Mark was bristling at the way in which Lesley was being treated. He was determined to make as much of her as possible, and to let everybody, Mrs. Ord in particular, see that he was doing it. So he directed his whole conversation to her and let slip the opportunities to release the Duchess when the reformer broke down for want of

breath, until towards the end, when he introduced Lesley to her, and asked her to tell the Duke that she had met Buck Brydges's daughter. The Duchess was more than cordial. She entered into a conversation *à trois*, asked Lesley to call, and a few days afterwards sent her an invitation to a house-party through the Aylmers, which Lesley felt herself unable to accept. She could not afford it, and it was not in Lesley's nature to go there without explaining that she was a secretary, which would make the invitation a farce. What could a Duchess want with a secretary for a friend?

Lesley did not ask what could a secretary want with a Duchess for a friend, though it might have saved her many hours of misery afterwards.

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When the ladies left the luncheon-table, Mark sprang up to hold the door open—he was much nearer to it than Mr. Ord, and he wished to whisper to his wife as she went out, to have a talk with Lesley Brydges.

Marian Aylmer had already nodded to her across the table, and would, without his prompting, have exchanged a few words with her. But now she did more; she asked her all about the place, and how it was that she had not been to see them, when she was living with their friends. She was not slow in discovering that, though the girl was well-paid, and took her meals with the family, neither husband nor wife ever exchanged a word with her which was not practically an order, and that, as her duties extended through meals, she was at their beck and call for fourteen to sixteen hours a day, and was running about or writing nearly the whole time. She had hardly been out since she came into the house except on some errand for her employers, generally the female employer, whom she was not engaged to serve in any way. She had only contracted to be Mr. Ord's private secretary. She further ascertained that of political work and correspondence, the really interesting part of the duties of a politician's secretary,

she had done absolutely nothing. Mrs. Ord kept that jealously to herself; Lesley was almost entirely the drudge.

The large-souled Marian cordially hated Mrs. Ord, and ideas of a pitched battle crossed her mind. But she knew how Mark hated quarrels so she refrained, and did her work more femininely, and just as effectively, by putting it into Lesley's mind to demand Saturday afternoon and all Sunday free, and two hours of daylight on the other days for exercise.

"Mind you, it is tantamount to giving notice; but it is worth it. Besides it is your duty to yourself and to the other women-workers. It is intolerable that a girl of your age, or a woman of any age, in fact, should not have a minute to herself in the day, in a house where twenty people are employed. The butler would not stand it, nor any of the female servants above the kitchen maid. It's just in these sort of matters that you girls make such mistakes. There are inspectors and all sorts of people to look after the actual working classes, the factory hands and apprentices and so on; but you educated women have no one but yourselves to keep up the standard of working hours and health for each other. There ought to be a sort of Trades Unionism for independent women-workers, but instead of that you allow yourselves as individuals to be trampled on; you let your employers forget that you are human beings, or anything but machines for work. And because there are unfortunately so many women in need of work you find yourself in danger of losing your post when you demand what every worker, man or woman, has a right to demand—freedom out of working hours so that you can live the life of a human being instead of an automaton. I mean it, Lesley; if you had seen as much as I have seen of the misery in the lives of governesses and nurses and lady-helps, you'd know that it is up to you to do it for the sake of the women that come after."

"I will," said Lesley, and she meant it.

As she knew that Mrs. Ord would be abnormally busy

for the next few days, she determined not to prefer her request till Thursday.

But that evening after tea, when all her guests were gone, Mrs. Ord fumed into the little morning-room, where Lesley usually worked when Mr. Ord was not actually dictating to her in his study, to demand what was the reason for her disgraceful behaviour at the luncheon-table.

"I don't know what you mean," said Lesley, quietly.

"How dare you flirt with Mr. Aylmer like that, so that the Duchess had no one to speak to at all!"

"I wasn't flirting," answered Lesley. "Besides, if you didn't mean me to talk to him, why did you put me next to him, you knew that we were friends!"

"Friends!" snorted Mrs. Ord. "I put you beside him because you are a nobody, and I wanted him to talk undisturbed to the Duchess!"

Lesley's sense of humour almost got the better of her: the whole position was so ridiculous. "I am sorry," she said, "it will not occur again."

But Mrs. Ord was infuriated; she felt quite sure that it was the last time that the Duchess of Brighton would be baited successfully with the Aylmers, even if they were not leaving almost immediately for America.

"No, I will take good care that it does not occur again! And I should like to know what Mrs. Aylmer meant by saying, when she went away, that she hoped to play golf with you next Sunday?"

Lesley was inwardly rather dismayed by having the crisis thrust upon her at such an inopportune moment, but she faced the issue bravely, and stated her case, as Marian Aylmer had suggested.

"It's the most ungrateful thing I ever heard of," raged Mrs. Ord. "You have been treated like a daughter, and you retaliate by demanding days out and hours off like a servant, though no servant would have the impertinence to ask out every day."

"I have been a servant in everything but name," retorted Lesley. "Indeed not one servant, but several. For you have had me in the room without ringing for

me, and asked me to do everything which was not the duty of any particular servant."

"I was never spoken to like this in my life before! I'll not have you in the house another day!" hissed Mrs. Ord.

"Very well," answered Lesley, now thoroughly irate. "I'm sure I don't want to stay. I can get my things packed by dinner-time; if not, I must ask you to let me come in to-morrow morning to finish them."

Mrs. Ord was congratulating herself that Lesley had not demanded the month's salary, when she burst into her husband's study to complain and boast. But he would not hear of it. "If you send her away without notice, Bertha, she is entitled to a month's salary, and I shall pay it to her whether she demands it or not. And if she cannot conveniently get through her packing to-day she must have as much time as she wants. Remember too that she must arrange where she is to go to. I quite agree with you," he said, "that she cannot remain with us after speaking to you like that, but we must not let her make us behave unworthily of ourselves, Bertha."

"There are times when I like to behave unworthily of myself, and this is one of them," said Mrs. Ord, still more infuriated by his attitude.

"Unfortunately she was engaged as my private secretary, so the unworthiness would be mine," he said, in his sententious way.

"You'd fuss about your coffin," retorted his wife, who was not a great lady when she was angry.

CHAPTER X

NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENTS AND EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES

THUS Lesley found herself with a little over eight pounds in her pocket, and the necessity for getting some immediate employment. She was in good spirits about her dismissal. She had obtained her three places so easily that she anticipated no difficulty about finding another, and she was becoming weary of the slavery without a moment to herself, which had been her life at the Ords. It was true that she ran up against a considerable number of well-known people, but she was not introduced to them, so she saw little advantage in that, though she had aided Mrs. Ord at one or two imposing receptions. She especially objected to the confinement, because it made her lose sight of the charming circle of friends, which she had formed since she came to London.

She found a room vacant at the Buckingham Palace Club, and settled down into her old quarters again with a sigh of relief. The overpowering and unhomely grandeur of the Ords oppressed her from the beginning, and though she luxuriated in the great bathrooms and the fine linen of the beds, and the spacious rooms, she parted from them without a qualm.

"Tell Miss Openshaw that I am back, when she comes in from business," Lesley said to Luigi the hall-porter,

and Agnes knocked at her door not half an hour after her arrival.

"Oh, Agnes, it's good to be back again," cried Lesley after they had greeted each other, "and to feel that I am free and an individual once more. Sometimes I thought I should choke in that great hideous house! The only thing that ever gave me any pleasure in it was my bathroom. That had as many taps as an organ, and I nearly drowned myself every day for a month, trying which was which."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Agnes.

"Look for work, I suppose, and in the meantime take an enforced and much-longed-for holiday."

Agnes said nothing. She walked to the window of Lesley's room, where she stood drumming her fingers on the pane. It was a little after seven: down in the square a few passers-by, workers most of them, hurrying to their homes, were battling against the wind behind umbrellas: the rain pattered disconsolately on the glass.

Lesley opened her dressing-case, and pushed her half-unpacked trunk under the bed. "We've just time for a smoke before dinner, Agnes: sit down here and tell me all that you've been doing since I've been away; you're a miser about letter-writing, you know. I believe you've only written to me once in six months!" She curled herself up at the foot of the bed and lit a cigarette luxuriously. "Oh, it's heavenly to be back again in this dear fusty little room—it *is* fusty, you know, although the window has been open ever since I came in—and to feel the old atmosphere of work, and friendship, and freedom, and everything."

Agnes continued to drum on the window-pane with her fingers, and look down into the lamplight of the square. Lesley altered her position on the bed, so that she could see her standing there. Something rather forlorn in the pose of her figure troubled Lesley: it was so unlike the gay, confident Agnes. "Aren't you glad to see me back again?" she asked tentatively.

Agnes was resting her forehead against the window.

She drew back, and watched the little cloud of mist which had gathered on the inside of the wet pane, disperse. She turned away, and crossing over to the dressing-table, lit one of Lesley's cigarettes. "Why should I be glad to see you back in the treadmill?" she answered gloomily.

There was silence for a moment: then Agnes turned round impulsively. "Forgive me, dear," she said, "I have one of my moods upon me: when I awoke this morning and the maid called to me that it was time to get up, I answered 'All right,' and then just turned my head and buried my face in my pillow. I was dancing late last night and I was tired, but not so tired in my body as I was in my mind. I lay there and laughed aloud at myself—poor pleasure-seeker, not daring to lift my head to the light because of the cloud of depression which sat on my forehead! I knew my ancient enemy even in that waking moment! It has not left me since: it is as though my soul were out of my body, the fire, which is life, gone. It will come back again of course, but meanwhile this other self of mine just eats and sleeps and looks on, and sees life as a hopeless muddle, with all the strings twisted like the reins of a team of horses out of control. My only desire is to lie on my bed in silence with my face buried in the pillow trying to forget things."

"I know," said Lesley. "When I am miserable I too always want to abase myself physically. When I'm really unhappy and at the end of my courage, I want to lie on the floor with my head on the ground, and I always wish it was the earth—somehow, I don't know how it is, I get some comfort from contact with the earth."

Agnes laughed suddenly. "You're making me feel better already," she said. "But if you feel miserable in this house, I advise you to make use of your pillow and not the floor: you'll find the carpet dusty enough to give you hay fever if you put your face down to it."

Then the girls talked of what they had been doing during the last six months, and Agnes shrugged her shoulders over the Ords, and agreed that Lesley was well away from them. "You can stick that sort of thing for

a few months," she said, characteristically, "but it isn't in human nature to stick it for long."

"I suppose I must try and get some more research work," said Lesley, "I don't want to live-in again, because when you live in, though the life is easy and more or less luxurious, you never have a moment in which you can call your soul your own."

"Perhaps that man Reggie Tirebuck could help you," suggested Agnes.

"Oh, I don't want to bother him; we haven't seen anything of each other for ages, and when I wrote to tell him about the death of Major Waugh, he was very off-hand: I don't think he approves of my being so friendly with the Aylmers."

"Well, Clarence Verity, then."

"He is on the Riviera; besides, he found the Ord job for me, so in a way I'm glad he is out of town, because if he helped me again, I should feel dependent upon him, and I don't like that."

"Pooh!" said Agnes. "Women are always dependent upon men, if they would only acknowledge the fact."

"Well, this time I mean to find some work off my own bat," declared Lesley. "So far, I have been in London for a year and a half and I have supported myself after a fashion, but each time the work has come to me through friends; Reginald Tirebuck gave me the introduction to Major Waugh's friend, Clarence Verity brought me in touch with the Ords."

"But you found the post on *Last Week* yourself!"

"Yes I did, but I got that purely and simply on my looks—just as I might be given a place in the front row of the pantomime, if I chose to make a show of myself."

"Nevertheless, you'll find your looks the chief asset in getting work," said Agnes—"it's the personal equation that counts with employers."

"Then I think that the whole system is rotten! Do you mean to say that if I was ugly and a hunchback, I couldn't get work to do, no matter how much intelligence and willingness to serve I brought with me?"

"Of course you could, if you were highly trained and were willing to accept work at which you would toil from nine in the morning till six or eight at night for a wage on which you could live, but on which you could never hope to save more than a pittance sufficient to pay off your doctor's bill; with the knowledge always before you that one day you would be sent off so that a younger woman might step into your shoes, thrown, so to speak, on the scrap heap of humanity, a worn-out machine. Besides, you have had no training, just as half the other women who try to find employment have no training, and can never scrape enough together to get one. But for God's sake, my dear girl, don't do as so many others have done, get into a rut and wear yourself out body and soul, because you are thankful to be in it, and, though you know that it may lead to destitution in the end, it means bread for to-morrow!"

"I don't mean to," said Lesley stoutly. "I mean to get any sort of post to pay my way while I take evening classes in shorthand and bookkeeping. I know how to type, and I can speak and write fluent French and Italian, so I ought to be certain of getting work as a secretary."

"Yes," answered Agnes, sardonically. "With those accomplishments—*and* your good looks, my dear, you will be able to command from thirty to forty-five shillings per week for the next twenty years. But there's no sliding scale of promotion, you know,—you start as a clerk and you finish as a clerk—and at the end, when Nature begins to take toll for the unnatural life you have been leading, for women are not machines, what will become of you? Will you live on charity or go to the workhouse?"

Lesley rose from her comfortable perch on the bed, and deposited her cigarette-end in an ash tray. Then she came across to Agnes and faced her. "You're a brute, Agnes! Are you trying to discourage me?" she demanded. "You, who have so much courage!"

But Agnes would not meet her eyes.

"My dear, I have no courage at all," she said, in a low

voice. Then she roused herself. "You're a splendid person, Lesley, and I believe you are one of the people who are bound to succeed. Get your work off your own bat, and keep your blessed independence: you're quite right not to let Clarence help you; go and put your name down at the Beddoes Employment Agency to-morrow. It's in Piccadilly, and you don't have to pay an entrance fee, which is a consideration when funds are low, and in the meantime, as I heard the dinner-bell, let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow—we work!"

"You've not told me a thing about yourself, Agnes, or about Dolly."

"That will keep," said Agnes.

As the two girls were going downstairs together, Lesley asked whether Mary Strange had been to the Club lately.

"No," said Agnes. "She came to see me one evening soon after you went to the Ords; she was rather down on her luck, poor dear, and was working in a restaurant at ten shillings a week."

"Good heavens! Couldn't she get anything better than that?"

"No, you most confident young woman, she could not!"

"Do you know that it's more than a year since I saw Mary last! I can't believe that the time has gone so quickly. Why, it's a year in December since she left the Club and I've not seen or heard anything of her from that day to this!"

"That's London," said Agnes. "Mary's been having a bad year and for the time being she has gone under: you have been floating along on the crest of the waves with your head in the sunlight, so you've forgotten her."

"Don't," said Lesley, "it hurts me."

"Well, as Dolly says, 'what of it, what if it does?' Your life and Mary's constitute an epitome of all London. What can be crueller than a city, or more lonely! You are surrounded on all sides by human beings, hemmed in by them, but your coming and going makes no more

impression than the splash of a pebble thrown into a trough of the sea. You don't know, until you have tried it, how easily you can slip out of recognition and out of remembrance.

"Justt hink of those rows and rows of streets with houses all alike, which stretch at angles across suburbia and out into the fields! To me they are the most depressing thing in the world; there's nothing so utterly selfish and self-satisfied as a street of houses, each with its trim little gate, its square rod of garden, its discreetly curtained windows. How decorous they are, how blind! Where could you be more utterly alone? Each one of them is closed in, hedged about with the unwritten law of conventionality; if they have anything in them of human nature it is carefully hidden away. You might be starving in the street, but those doors would not open; you might be Pan himself playing upon his pipes, calling the inmates out of their little self-made prisons to the joyous life of youth, and all the response you would get would be the flutter of curtains where someone, bolder than the rest or more curious, craned down to see the madman pass. You might go down such a street at night crying out in the name of Christ for shelter, only to make those invisible dwellers in the houses more appreciative of bodily comforts as they drew nearer to their cheerful fires. The neighbour on the right of one of those homes might be dying, but if she had not been made formally acquainted, no help would come to her. And on the other side a woman might be breaking her heart, yet the only answer to her sobs would be the echo of a rag-time tune tinkling through thin walls!"

"Agnes! What a horrible picture! Why are you so pessimistic to-night?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I was thinking of Mary. You know that she went into a milliner's workroom where she was working from nine in the morning till half-past six at night, and often till eight, when they were busy, for twelve shillings a week—eleven and ninepence, when they took her insurance money off. She had such splendid

courage; I couldn't have stood the life for a day; but she went on at it until the slack season came and she was turned off with most of the other girls. Then she tossed about from one place to another, always on starvation wages, until she got this post as waitress in a restaurant, where, though the money is so little, she is properly fed—for the first time for years, I should say!"

"Oh! I think it's awful!"

"She has bad luck," said Agnes, simply, "in everything but her nature. There she is more fortunate than the rest of us, because no matter how poor she is or what work she does, she can always distil happiness out of it. But I suppose you can hardly call that luck, it is just God's gift."

"Is she still working at the restaurant?"

"I suppose so; but I haven't seen or heard anything of her since she came here in the autumn: I don't even know where she is living. I'll send a card to the restaurant to tell her that you've come back."

* * * * * *

The next day Lesley went to the Beddoes Employment Agency to put down her name for work. She was quite confident of finding another well-paid and comparatively easy post in spite of her conversation with Agnes, especially since the other members of the Club had told her at dinner overnight that the Beddoes Agency had Society ladies going to them for twice as many applicants of all sorts as they could possibly supply. "And you are so young and pretty and well-dressed," said little Emmeline Pryce with innocent irony, "that you won't find any difficulty."

Lesley was chilled by her reception. She stated her case to a worried-looking secretary, who asked her to sit down and wait. And there Lesley sat for the best part of an hour before the head of the office gave the signal that she was at liberty.

When Lesley went into the inner room she found a pleasant looking woman, daughter of a famous Nonconformist

preacher and socialist. Miss Beddoes explained at once that if Lesley had been a lady's maid, or a cook, or a parlour-maid, or even a housekeeper, she had a dozen places waiting for her to go into, but that secretaries who had so little training and experience were only engaged by ladies who were personal friends, or by men who liked their looks.

"I have had one post like that," said Lesley. "What I want more than anything else is research work. I lived in Italy and France till I was twenty-four, so I really know both languages, and I did research work for several months at the Colonial Office for Major Waugh."

"Have you a reference from him?"

"No; he died suddenly, before the work was finished."

After a few more questions, Miss Beddoes put down her pen, and leant back to survey Lesley. "I am afraid," she said, "that you are going to find it rather difficult; you have no particular qualifications for research work; it is true that you know Italian and French thoroughly, but for research work one generally needs some special study. I only have one post of the sort on my books; it is for a professor of chemistry, and he is looking for a college woman, who has passed various examinations. I am afraid that I can do nothing for you, Miss Brydges, in this line, but I will put your name down, and if anything comes on the books, I will let you know. Where are you living?"

Lesley gave her address, and came down into Piccadilly, feeling low-spirited. It was the first time that she had come up against the fact that where a woman is not educated with a view to earning her own living, it is practically impossible for her to do it with any satisfaction unless she is backed by influence or friends. Still there were other avenues besides research, and, though Lesley regretted the once lightly-prized work at the Colonial Office, with its independence, and its easy hours in the quiet library, she determined to write to Miss Beddoes to say that she was willing to undertake any work of which that lady thought her capable.

In the meantime she put her name down at various other agencies, which did not demand a booking fee in advance, and every day she searched through the columns of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Morning Post* on the chance of finding suitable employment. Only those who have waited hour by hour for the postman's knock know how you eat your heart out when he passes the door, or when, after his rat-tat has startled the silence, you search in vain through a heap of letters for an envelope bearing your name!

At first Lesley had high courage: she enjoyed the long silent days, which she spent in the Club, mending and patching and tidying up her wardrobe. She had not spent the money she saved at the Ords, because she was in her heart a little afraid lest work should be difficult to find. She carried the thought of Mary in her mind; there had been no word from her in answer to the card that Agnes sent to the restaurant. But after a week or two Lesley began to be lonely, and to find the days hang heavy on her hands. The Aylmers had gone to America, and it happened that all her more intimate acquaintances, like the Kilpins, were on the Continent. She did not care to look up the others, because she was a little out of spirit at her failure to find work, and she did not feel inclined to spend her dwindling capital on such frivolities as bus and cab fares, and the gloves and slippers she would have been forced to buy.

Day after day went by without bringing any word from the Beddoes Agency, or from any of the other agencies. Lesley, sick at heart, grew to loathe the cheerful knock of the postman bringing in its train a rush of false hopes. She spent the days in tramping through London, now letting her imagination run riot in Fleet Street, the Magic Artery, "the Street of Adventure," which is the brain centre of England; now lingering in the parks, where already the feet of Spring had touched the hollows with a gentle fire of crocuses, and the mists hung over the Serpentine on windless February noons. Sometimes when she had been making the dreary round of agencies, hearing

the same old story of such-and-such a post which had been snapped up only half an hour ago, she whiled away the time by looking at the shops in Regent Street and Oxford Circus. But unless the magic of those early spring mornings buoyed up her spirits, she went back to the Club unutterably depressed and out of temper for her excursion into the gay world.

If the sun was shining, and her hopes had been raised by the promise of work, she could bear with equanimity the tiresome attentions of those elderly and middle-aged men in morning-coats and silk hats who seem to spend their days patrolling Regent Street and Oxford Street. Her lithe upright figure never failed to attract their notice, and they would follow her patiently from window to window, pausing when she paused, discreetly at first, then more daring, till at last they stood close beside her, challenging her with bold eyes in the mirrors, or face to face. Though they disgusted her she took their attentions lightly; perhaps her Continental upbringing helped her here; she was so used to the outspoken comments of an Italian street. When their presence became too obnoxious, she would go into the shop and walk through it to the furthest exit, child enough to find amusement in the trickery. But there were days, dull days, when the sun was hidden in murk and the wind blew raw down the streets, whipping the dust into her eyes, and then these people's unwelcome attentions seemed to sear her soul. Unfamiliar Italian curses, stored unconsciously by her memory, sprang to her lips, and would have been uttered, in her savage misery, on very little provocation: Lesley was horrified at herself.

On these days she could not bear to go near Bond Street to see the neat and cared-for women walking there. She shunned the parks because the sight of the children playing with their nurses below the trees made her heart feel empty. She was possessed of a mute craving for the hills of Italy, for the clear sunshine and peace of her country side, for the grandeur and aloofness of her towns.

These were bad days for Lesley Brydges. Most women fear the valley of the Shadow of Death less than the valley whose Shadow is called Loneliness. For it is woman's prerogative and pleasure to enter into the former in the service of those she loves; but there is no service in the Valley of the Shadow of Loneliness, neither is there any hope, only the outer darkness of those whose gifts of sympathy and love are wasted, poured out like water on the sands of misunderstanding.

Lesley's thoughts turned to Ken Western and to Peter Webbe, both of them luxuriating in the fragrance of a Roman spring. She had written to Ken once or twice, and had heard from him a month ago, but it was long since she had written to Peter, or received a letter from him in his formal scholar's hand. She ached to write and tell him of her loneliness, but pride and her courage forbade. "I will write when I find work and am independent again," she said to herself, little dreaming that she would meet Peter in the flesh before she set pen to paper.

Then one morning Lesley had a letter from Clarence Verity dated from Paris, saying that he was coming back to London and asking her to dine with him at Prince's restaurant on the following evening, and dance or do a theatre with him afterwards. Lesley's heart warmed at the idea of it; she spent some happy hours cleaning and tidying up one of her few presentable evening-gowns; she heaved a sigh of regret over the frayed satin of her slippers, and shook her head over the darns in her white silk stockings, which had done yeoman's service in many a ballroom. But what did such little things matter? Clarence was coming back again, she would not be lonely any more.

"You've had some luck!" said Agnes that night, when she heard Lesley singing on the staircase.

"No," laughed Lesley, "no luck at all."

"Well, something's happened, then."

"No. What could have happened, you silly person?" answered Lesley, though her happy eyes belied her words.

For she was happy; she had not dreamt how glad she would be to see Clarence Verity again until she heard that he was actually upon his way. Somehow the thought of it gave her fresh hope; she had forgotten her vows of independence. "Surely between the two of us we shall find some work," had been one of her first thoughts.

But Agnes was not satisfied. "What have you been doing to-day?" she asked. "Didn't you answer an advertisement in the *D. T.* and have an appointment or something?"

Lesley gave a little gurgle of amusement. "I should think I did! It was one of the funniest experiences I ever had. You remember there was an advertisement, giving as an address a box number at the *Daily Telegraph* offices, asking for a lady of good birth and education as a 'receptionist' for an oculist? Well, it seemed the sort of post I might apply for, as no experience was necessary, and I answered it. A very curious letter came this morning, with sprawly handwriting and unusual wording, asking me to be at an address in New Oxford Street at half-past two. I didn't much like the look of the letter, but I thought I would go and see what sort of place it was. It turned out to be a rather questionable looking office over a shop, a quack oculist's, I suppose. The man was an appalling and terrifying bounder, who took a violent fancy to me; no matter what difficulties I raised he said he was perfectly certain that I should suit him. One of my duties was to keep shop while he was away. 'You needn't be lonely,' he said, 'you can ask your friends up to sit with you: I'm sure a good-looking girl like you has plenty of young men friends.' Of course that settled it as far as I was concerned, as you can imagine: however, he was so persistent that I saw I should never get away unless I pretended that I would take the post: so I told him I would write and let him know definitely to-night. Whereupon he tried to make me go into a small inner room, a sort of consulting room, and take off my hat while he examined my eyes. I did draw the line at this,

because, to tell you frankly, I didn't trust him very far. I told him that I could not take off my hat because I was going on to a reception with some friends, who were waiting for me below. He looked rather crestfallen at that and said, "Well, come over here by the window; I only want to *look* into your eyes!' Which he did, most oppressively, while I preserved a bland and innocent demeanour. I was rather glad to get downstairs, because he had a nasty habit of edging in between me and the door every time I tried to get away."

"Brute!" said Agnes. "You know, Lesley, I think you ought to be careful what advertisements you answer."

"Oh, I am."

"But it wasn't the oculist who put you in such good spirits!"

"Yes, it was," teased Lesley; "he gave me glasses of *couleur de rose!*"

* * * * * *

Not even the discomfort of having to go to Prince's by bus on the following evening damped Lesley's spirits, though she hoped devoutly that Clarence would not drive up in his motor and see her just when she was crossing the road and dodging the traffic. She was early, having calculated too much time for the journey. Just as she was leaving the cloak-room, Clarence entered the door.

"What punc. people we are!" he exclaimed in chaff, because Lesley was not noted for her punctuality.

"Oh, Cotty," she cried, "how nice it is to see you again!" "Cotty," was his nickname among his girl friends, because when he was making a protest about anything he had a habit of saying, "I am only a simple cotton-manufacturer!"

"Not half as nice as it is to see you, Lesley," he said warmly. He had never called her Lesley before; but then, she had never called him Cotty to his face, though she always spoke of him as Cotty Verity.

"Just wait half a moment while I get rid of my hat and coat, then we'll get some food and have a tremendous talk. I want a long and detailed account of all that you've been doing, and then you'll have to listen while I tell you how I broke a record at Biarritz and won a hundred pound sweep in a golfing competition!"

He was so brown and healthy and happy-looking that Lesley felt a real affection for him. But, though she had meant to tell him everything about her life since she left the Ords, she found, now that they were face to face, that in spite of herself she drew a curtain of reserve between them. Was it her woman's instinct or merely the inevitable withdrawal which separates the poor from the rich? She was in her gayest spirits and, after she had heard his news, kept him in fits of laughter for the rest of dinner over her misadventures in search of work. When he grew anxious, she laughed away his fears, and Clarence, relieved in his mind and not understanding the real state of affairs, thought no more of the matter.

But when they were smoking after dinner, Verity suddenly grew grave. "I hate to hear of women like you working," he said, "it seems such a jolly shame; you were never intended to work."

"The shame is that I *was* never intended to work—never trained to work by my father. Every woman ought to be trained for some career in which there are plenty of vacancies."

"What sort of career?"

"Oh, teachers in Board schools, factory-inspectors, assistants in shops; there are lots of openings for women nowadays."

"I should hate to think of a girl-relative of mine being any of these things. I'd rather she was a governess or a companion in a decent family."

"How like a man!—you want to cramp us at every turn. Why, that is the worst form of slavery!"

"Well, hang it all, what is a girl to do when she has no training, like yourself for instance?"

"Join in a great movement to make the State the

employer of every sane, healthy, and decent person who is willing to do honest and sincere work, and is not needed for the moment by private enterprise."

"What could the State do with them?"

"Municipal food-shops would absorb an immense number."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, you know what hunger there is in our great cities, and what terrible waste there is every year of the fruit and crops, the apples which lie rotting on the ground in Devonshire, the fish used for manuring the fields in the Isle of Man, and that sort of thing, on account of the expense of getting things to market?"

"Yes."

"Well, why aren't there Government depôts in all produce centres, ready to buy every ounce of fish and fruit and butter and milk and eggs which are brought to them, at certain low but steady rates, and take them by a motor service to the great towns, where there would be municipal shops for disposing of them, run by experts, who understand the special kind of food they are selling, and have the faculty of training the intelligent unemployed to be salesmen and saleswomen? The poor would be able to buy their food very much cheaper."

"Not very practical, my dear girl," said Clarence, who had the experience of being a director in a great company.

"They manage affairs better in Denmark and Canada! Here neither the State nor the rich men of the country have the energy to form a scheme of organization which would develop into consistent trade. There is talk of the Government and an all-round grumble because so little is done, but these things should not have to go through the cumbersome machinery of Parliament; they are the work at hand—every man's work! But we hang back, waiting, waiting for the millennium in which everything shall be accomplished: nothing was ever done without a beginning.

"And it's the same with education. Why don't the men

in the street, the men who inhabit the millions of houses in England—the lawyers, the doctors, the Civil Servants, the bank-managers, the stockbrokers and all the rest who form the backbone of the great middle class—turn their attention, each in his own home, to the suitable education of his daughters as well as his sons? Let them be taught housewifery by all means, that's woman's true work, but let them be taught as well to take their place in the world side by side with their brothers. If the professions are closed to them, let them go in for trade!"

"I see your point," said Clarence, "about the waste that goes on, and I think that the waste of human energy and capacity, which is represented by these women, is more deplorable than the waste of produce. But I don't see how it can be remedied."

"I'm all in the dark!" said Lesley. "There's something desperately wrong with social laws if nothing can be done to remedy the evil. It's not only the waste of the human energy of those unemployed and uneducated women which you have to think about; it's the terrible and tragic waste of all that is best and gentlest in their nature which is going on year in and year out!"

But Clarence, who was interested enough in social laws, could not follow her here: he was out of his depth.

"My dear girl, the trouble with you is that you're tilting at windmills. You've not got to think of their souls: no one has time to think of souls, except parsons, who're paid to do it. The State is doing the best it can: people generally are beginning to be quite boringly in earnest on the subject of sweated industries and minimum wages and all that. In fact this is an age of appalling seriousness—but for God's sake, Lesley, keep out of it, or you'll grow wrinkles!"

"I'm getting past the fear of wrinkles!" said Lesley, laughing in spite of herself.

Then Clarence insisted on taking her to a Revue at one of the great music-halls to cheer her up, and they were soon in high spirits again.

But that night he lay awake for a long time, thinking how such a movement might be started, and Lesley get a good post in it.

He was also scheming to start a London office of his own firm for her benefit. Why couldn't he find an excuse for giving her a salary ?

CHAPTER XI

AGNES OPENSHAW BREAKS HER BARS

IT was less than a week after Clarence Verity's return to London that one morning, when the maid woke Lesley by bringing in the hot water, she said :

" Miss Openshaw asked me to give you this note, Miss."

" Miss Openshaw ? " said Lesley in surprise. " Did she give it to you, just now ? "

" She give it me for you yesterday before she went out, Miss."

" Well, why didn't you bring it to me ? "

" She said particular, I was to give it to you the first thing this morning, Miss."

" Oh ! " said Lesley, sitting up and opening the letter hurriedly. Then she paused. " Did Miss Openshaw come back to dress last night before she went out ? "

" No, Miss. I think she's gone away for the week-end, Miss : she took a dressing-case with her."

But Lesley had begun reading her letter, and the maid, who was rather curious, having lingered to pull up the blinds, and fold and refold the towels on the rack, took her departure.

" DEAR OLD GIRL," it ran,

" By the time that you read this I shall have taken the irrevocable plunge. I have told the Manageress that I shall be away for a week-end. Heaven alone knows

what is to happen after that. You will guess that Dolly and I have gone away together. I don't know what to say to you, dear Lesley, because my mind is rather *boulversé* at the thought of what I am doing. I am tempted to plead extenuating circumstances, but I will not, for, as you are a woman, you will understand. I suppose that, in the eyes of most of my friends and acquaintances, I am in the process of damning my soul. Which reminds me of a conversation I once had with Mary. In the early days, when she and I saw a great deal of each other, long before Dolly came upon the scenes, it used to worry her that I did not settle down and marry. There were several men at that time who wanted to marry me, and for one in particular—a dear boy, he is dead now of fever on the Gold Coast—Mary seemed to hold a brief. But somehow or other, though I liked them all, they were not the right men for me. 'Surely you can care enough for one of them to marry him?' she urged. 'You are making a mistake, Agnes; it's all right for you as long as they keep on coming, but the day will arrive when there are no more to follow, and you will find yourself old, and where will you go then for the love and admiration and comradeship, which you have never learnt to do without?'

"'I can't help it,' I answered; 'up till now no one has wakened my soul.'

"'Perhaps there is no soul to wake,' she replied.

"And that's just where it is, Lesley. It may be that there is no soul, that I am frankly pagan, needing only the sunlight. Perhaps the gods were laughing the night that I was born. For it seems to me that I can be a comrade to all men and a wife to none—none, that is to say, except Dolly. And Dolly—surely the gods *were* laughing—has never thought of me as a wife! But I am going away with him to give what I have to give. Do you remember that day when we walked in the Green Park, you said to me: 'Think what *you* have to give instead of what they are trying to give,' or something to that effect. I have often thought of your words, they put a new interpretation for

me on the position of men and women. That is what I am doing now. Besides, I am weary of the life with nothing real in it that I have been living: I am thirty and I have no time to lose. Perhaps you, with your cold purity, will think badly of me for doing this: but I honestly believe it is the best for me. You have often asked me, since you came back from the Ords, why I am so changed, so out of spirits. The reason is that I have been making myself unhappy, knowing that Dolly had to be reckoned with, because I believed I was selling my ignoble little soul for all the worthless pleasures that money can buy: Dolly is very rich and generous, you know.

"But my mind is clear now; after months of hesitation, I am confident that I am only fulfilling my destiny: some women are not intended to be wives and mothers.

"I will not pose to you: you know my feelings about Dolly, and, beyond them, I will say frankly that my desire is towards the life he can offer me. For eight years now, ever since my mother died, I have been working, first in the City and later at the Maison Tarobert, going round and round like a cab-wheel in a rut. And so I should go on until I wore out, if it were not for Dolly; and I haven't the courage to do it, Lesley. Sometimes when I look round at the tired, worn, hopeless faces of the women workers, as they come back through the streets after their day of toil, I know that I would rather die and lie at rest in the Morgue than face growing old under such conditions. They are, many of them, as daintily bred as I am, but what is the substance of their life?—long days of underpaid and uncongenial labour, and apart from that a grey existence, bereft of all beauty. By their mode of living they are debarred from intellectual and mental stimulant; they are too weary at night to read; their long working hours give them few chances of seeing the sunlight; and most of their precious half-holidays and Sundays are spent in laundering or making garments, because by so doing they can save a few pence. Then take the more material beauties of life! It's no good shaking your head, my dear; these things do count for

happiness—it is woman's nature to love pretty frocks and soft and dainty linen—these workers never dress, they merely clothe themselves: however weary they may be, they can afford no other vehicle than the noisy jolting omnibus, and often for this they must stand on the corner of the street, perhaps in a pouring rain, which soaks through their thin skirts and mended boots. And when they reach their homes—it is irony to use the word home in the case of many of them—they find cold rooms, and poor and insufficient food, and often uncongenial companionship, forced upon them because they must for economy's sake share with another woman the little privacy they could not afford to pay for alone! That is one side of the shield. And all the time there is the world of beauty beyond! Meadow grass rippling in the wind, great sunlit waves booming on the shore, the maddening fragrance of lime trees in flower—sight, sound and scent—a limitless world to choose from. Then for the mind there are books and plays and pictures, and, more important still, leisure to read and see and understand. Or take the more material life again—soft and luxurious clothes, delicate food, smooth-running motors and the ineffable sense of well-being and ease which money buys for you. When I see the faces of the women workers as they pour along the streets at night, it is not in me to blame the one who takes these things, even where she has no love to give! They are her right, else why did God create her with a beautiful shape?

"And beyond all this for me there is Dolly: and no one will ever mean so much to me. I'm not trying to white-wash myself, but many women marry with less reason. And you know what Shaw says about them, and about marriage as a profession for women? 'So it is a profession; and except that it is a harder bargain for both parties and that Society countenances it, I don't see how it differs from what we—bless our virtuous indignation!—stigmatize as prostitution.'

"It is after midnight, and I am a little afraid. Just now I came to your door: I felt so lonely that I was weak

enough to need your companionship. But I did not knock: in my mind I pictured you sleeping soundly. So I came back to finish my letter. Good-night, Lesley, and God bless you."

When she had finished reading, Lesley sat for a long time staring in front of her, holding the letter in her hands. Her thoughts were with Agnes. But after a while she found herself noticing all the details in the room, the graining of the furniture, the arrangement of the brushes on the dressing-table, the fly-spots on the window curtains. She frowned and returned to the letter, picking out a passage here and there. When she came to the words "You, in your cold purity," she paused. She thought of Clarence Verity, putting him in her mind's eye in the same relation to herself as Dolly Illington held to Agnes. But though she was fond of him, as women are fond of any nice man who is persistently kind to them, she had never for a moment felt towards him as Agnes felt for Dolly. She began to wonder how the situation would stand if Clarence Verity had been Peter Webbe. She sat very still, thinking, thinking. Presently a slow blush mounted to her forehead, it seemed to burn her neck and her whole body till it reached her slender hands.

"I suppose," said Lesley slowly, "that I love Peter." She stared ahead of her for a minute or two, with her knees drawn up, her hands clasped round them. Suddenly she put her head down on to them and began to cry, softly. The letter and envelope addressed in Agnes's pretty flourishing writing slipped to the floor unnoticed. But the maid did not find it when she hunted for it, while Lesley was at breakfast, because it was kicked under the bed, and she only turned the vallance up once a week, and after breakfast Lesley remembered to look for it and tear it up.

It was unfortunate that Agnes Openshaw had been engaged as secretary to the great Bond Street dressmaking concern, which was carried on under the name of the Maison Tarobert, for it had an atmosphere which proved fatal to her. The assistants were girls chosen for their beauty,

and their *amours* were notorious all over London. If a girl was a model at Tarobert's, men thought of her as they would have thought of a ballet-girl, except that she was likely to be more intelligent, and a great deal better dressed. They were the best paid models in London. But it was impossible to live as they lived on any salary they could earn, and the whole conversation in the show-rooms, when they were not attending to customers, was about getting men to pay for their extravagances. The Golden Youth used to hang about the place in a way which scandalized Mrs. Grundy. The admirer's method was to come once with a not-too-particular lady friend, and buy her something from the girl to whom he was most attracted, so as to get the hang of the place ; after this he came by himself, at first with some message about the purchase, and then avowedly.

If he did this, and behaved himself while he was in the shop, nothing was said to the girl. He was good for the business, and he was accepted as such.

Dolly Illington was one of them. He had been paying attentions to a girl in the Mantle Department, called Rosa Carey, and Rosa was tired of him. She had in fact met a man of title, unusually rich and foolish, out of whom she frankly expected to be able to get more than she could get out of Dolly Illington. But the same grit which gave Dolly a firm seat at Polo, and made him such a dashing player, made him difficult to shake off in other matters, and Rosa's new lover was by no means equal to the task of cutting him out.

Rosa was wise in her generation : she had often asked Agnes why she did not have a lover like the other girls, although she recognized, but would have died rather than confess it, that Agnes belonged to a different class from the girls who as a rule sought work in the Maison Tarobert. Her physical attractions were far superior to Rosa's, though she was not so correctly beautiful, and Rosa was well aware of it. For Agnes, though her mouth was rather large, had adorable teeth and, when she laughed with pleasure, looked radiant, and Agnes's gay brown eyes

laughed too, and the red blood was bright in her brown cheeks, and her upright figure repaid dressing so well that, unfortunately, being surrounded by temptations in this line, she was horribly in debt.

Had Rosa been jealous of Dolly Illington she would have taken good care to keep him out of Agnes' way, as indeed she did when Dolly first made overtures to her, notwithstanding the fact that it flattered her self-esteem to go about with Agnes, because, as she put it to her chief friend in the "Mantles," "it gives a sort of tone to the party—no one could mistake her for anything but a lady."

But now that Dolly, the rather grim and ungullible Dolly, of whom Rosa was secretly afraid, because she divined how little real hold she would ever have over him, had been superseded by a Lordling, she cast about in her mind for a means of distracting his attention from herself. It happened that one morning while he was speaking to her in the shop, Agnes passed through the department with a bundle of letters in her hand, which she was taking to the office of Monsieur Tarobert. Dolly's eyes wandered from Rosa, wavered, and then frankly followed Agnes's progress down the room.

"Who's that?" he asked.

With a thrill Rosa recognized her chance. But she looked round languidly, pretended that she had not seen who passed them, and when Dolly gave an eager description, feigned annoyance.

"Have you come to see me on purpose to talk about the other girls in the Maison Tarobert?"

Dolly laughed. "And if I had, would that make you very angry?" he asked pointedly.

"I don't know what you mean," said Rosa, rather taken aback.

"Yes you do, my dear," said Dolly, who was not in ignorance of the advent of the Lordling.

Rosa looked him straight in the eyes. "Well then, I do!" she said defiantly.

"All right," said Dolly. "Who's the girl?"

"She's the secretary, and her name is Agnes Openshaw."

"Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"I want to know her," said Dolly.

So it came about that Rosa arranged a picnic up the river with Dolly and herself and her new lover, and Agnes as a fourth, and at the picnic, with great astuteness, she kept Dolly from speaking to Agnes much until after dinner when the champagne flowed, though she did her best to make her shine. The new lover, she knew, was too stupid to be attracted by Agnes's brilliance; it only made him afraid of her. After dinner she adroitly gave Dolly the chance to transfer himself to Agnes, and then matters arranged themselves. This was the beginning of a long friendship.

So far Agnes had kept aloof from the men who frequented the salons of the Maison Tarobert; her friends, and she had many, never saw her in business hours, but Dolly, when once he had made her acquaintance, was difficult to gainsay. She had no intention of accepting him as a lover, though in the eyes of the Maison Tarobert he assumed that rôle, when he transfered his attentions to her; but she fell into the habit of going about with him, and, later, of taking presents from him like gloves and handkerchiefs and scent. From the beginning she realized the danger of seeing too much of Dolly Illington: he had the magnetism of great virility, but she was too light-hearted to take the matter seriously at first, and, afterwards, she could not bring herself to give up the pleasure of his society. So they drifted.

Dolly was content to bide his time. For one thing, he had existing entanglements to get rid of; for another it was a refreshing change to enjoy the society of a frank and beautiful girl, who was innocent, but full of life and good spirits. She was different from the other girls; he could take her everywhere unchallenged, and be sure of an afternoon or evening in which he would be dazzled by her wit and her charm. He grew very attached to her, and was well-behaved, and Agnes, for her part, grew accustomed to him, and unafraid of him. They became the greatest friends, and went everywhere together.

Dolly's presents of the etceteras of dress, on which a girl spends so much when she is out every night, and the fact that it never cost her anything to get to a place, beyond the bus fares to and from the shop, kept her head above water for a time. But Dolly's favourite places of amusement were the smartest *rendezvous* in London and, to a woman with small means, the dressing for such occasions spells ruination. Agnes fell into the habit of ordering gowns and evening cloaks from the Maison Tarobert. It was the regular *modus vivendi* of the model-girls, but Agnes had not hitherto taken advantage of the tacit form of credit which it implied. She shut her eyes to the real facts of the case, and, since the bill was never presented, her fears were lulled. She was always telling herself, to still her conscience, that she would be less extravagant next month, but Dolly's insistent calls on her companionship and the traitor within her own heart delayed the evil day of economizing. Once or twice, in a sober moment, she looked facts in the face and was frightened, and did make an effort to get straight again. It was in one of these moments that Dolly made his insidious suggestion that she should borrow the money from him.

Helped even as she was, her bills at length began to swamp her. Perhaps Monsieur Tarobert, shrewd and patient Frenchman that he was, grew weary of waiting for the settlement of her account, which, in his eyes, should have been accomplished long ago by a cheque from the pen of that rich Monsieur Illington. One morning he sent for her, and handed her an envelope, containing her account, with a smile and a small joke. There was no hint of pressure, but it weighed none the less heavily on her soul, and she took counsel with Rosa and others of her kidney, after pledging them to secrecy.

Directly she had made the promise, Rosa went off and telephoned to Dolly Illington: "Go in and win; she's on the rocks; she owes two hundred pounds."

Dolly was in a quandary. How was he to offer Agnes money when he could not tell her how he had heard that she wanted it. He asked Rosa.

"Don't tell her," said Rosa. "Make your proposal and wait for her to accept it."

Dolly turned it over in his mind, and came to no conclusion except to offer Rosa fifty pounds, if she could arrange the business for him.

He suggested indeed settling two hundred a year on Agnes, but Rosa shook her head.

"You don't know her: she's different to the rest of us: I believe she really is a lady. I couldn't say such a thing to her; I think she'd kill me."

"Then what am I to do?" asked Dolly in blank helplessness.

"How much money do you have to put down to bring in two hundred pounds a year?"

"About four thousand pounds, as interest goes nowadays."

"Are you willing to give her that instead of a settlement, for the loss of her good name, and to pay all her expenses while she is with you?"

"Quite."

"Then I shall tell her that you are tired of living alone—that you want to get one of the girls you know to come and live with you, and that, to prevent people asking where the money comes from for the upkeep of her flat, you are willing to give her four thousand pounds to set her up in business. The flat or house or whatever you take for her to stay with you is a separate affair, of course. You'll have to pay all the expenses of that."

"Quite."

"Then I'll feel my way with her."

"Shall I give you your fifty pounds now?"

"No," said Rosa, in a sudden fit of honesty. "I may not be able to earn it."

"But I shall give it to you, whether you succeed or not."

"Perhaps I shan't have the courage to try."

Rosa was no longer at the shop when this conversation took place: she had two motors and a sumptuous flat, and her lightest wish was gratified by her doting lover. But though he had introduced her to a gay theatrical

and sporting set, her real friends were still the girls who had been her friends at the shop.

Agnes had never been to her flat; there were scruples not yet overcome about that. But she often went out to entertainments with Rosa and "Freddie": she accepted with pleasure an invitation to a matinée, and tea in a private room at a teashop kept by a friend.

Rosa took care that the play should be a particularly enjoyable one, and ordered one of the sumptuous teas, off which Gertrude Freer was making a comfortable income.

Directly the girl who brought the tea had left the room she began her campaign.

"Well, have you got over your difficulties yet?"

"I wish to goodness I had; they are on my nerves dreadfully."

"Why don't you tell Dolly about them? He'd give you the money directly."

"You know what it would mean."

"It's all very well talking like that, Agnes, but I happen to know the direction in which Dolly's mind is running at the present moment. He wants to do like Toppy Lumsden, find a girl who is like a wife to him at home, and start her in a business of her own, so that she may have a life apart from his, and not simply dangle after him. Toppy used to give Gracie Armstrong an income, and they led a cat and dog life, but since he set her up in that milliner's business in Sloane Street they're pals again, like they used to be."

A thrill of fear ran through Agnes. So Dolly, the faithful Dolly, was getting tired of playing round with her, and was thinking of giving himself an establishment like the others, and she, just when she was most hard up, was going to be left stranded in a shoal of debts. For the first time she had an actual glimpse into that old nightmare of hers, the wilderness of unwanted womanhood, for as a natural sequence she had drifted away from most of her intimates in the old set since she had allowed Dolly to monopolize her. It was hardly to be wondered

at, and the kindly Bohemians, to whose parties she went, accepted without comment the fact that she never appeared anywhere without Dolly. If they imagined that the worst had happened, they regarded it as natural for a girl with small means placed in the midst of temptations, and probably genuinely in love with the man.

Her misery made her for the minute look quite old.

"Dolly isn't the sort of man to let you down," said Rosa, kindly: she was sorry for Agnes, for she realized that she was wrestling with scruples, which had never had any place in her own philosophy of life. She honestly thought that she was doing her best for the girl.

"It's a beastly world!" cried Agnes passionately. "I'm going home, Rosa: you mustn't mind! If I stay here I shall cry!"

As it happened Agnes meant to stop at home that evening because Dolly was going to a state dinner party, which his sister, who had married a Cabinet Minister, was giving. She had no appetite and did not come down to dinner at the Club, but sat quietly weeping in her own room.

It was nearing half past ten, and she was just thinking of undressing for bed when she heard a knock at the door.

"Mr. Illington, Miss."

"Tell Mr. Illington that I have gone to bed."

"You haven't really, Miss, and he said it was very particular."

Agnes guessed how he had expressed it, but she was miserable, and she felt that, if she was going to lose Dolly, she wanted him all the more while he was hers. She was weak and went.

The servant took her to the drawing-room—opened the door—announced her—and closed it behind her.

* * * * * *

Rosa, when Agnes left her, had driven to Dolly's chambers and reported progress. "Take her out to dinner somewhere," she said.

"I can't; I must go to my sister's."

"There are more important things in life than sisters."

"I think so too, but there is nothing more important than a dinner party; only your own funeral is an excuse for leaving a blank at a dinner-table."

"Bother your old dinner parties! You wouldn't have to do without your dinner, even if you didn't go there."

With that she flounced out of the room, and downstairs into her car.

Dolly thought harder than usual while he was dressing, and the result was that, when the ladies left the dining-room, he made an excuse to his brother-in-law and went round to the Buckingham Palace Club.

"Oh, Dolly," Agnes cried, as she went up to shake hands with him, "I did not expect it of you!"

"Expect what?" he asked. But his conscience smote him.

"That you would want to leave me for another woman!"

"But I don't," he protested.

"Rosa said that you did."

"Rosa had no right to say that I did."

"But you did say so, didn't you?" she persisted.

"No, I certainly did not."

"Well, what did you say?"

Dolly was more taken aback than he had ever been in his life.

At length he blurted out, "I said that I wished you could be like other girls—that it was a pity you should just be filling a small post at a shop, when you ought to have a business of your own—that I should like to give you a business of your own."

"And in return?" There was a warning note in her voice.

A little cherub, which sat up aloft, whispered into the ear of Adolphus Illington, and he said, "There are no conditions. I'm very fond of you, and I hear that you're awfully worried about money."

"Who told you?"

"All the girls."

"And would you really do this for me, Dolly?"

Dolly was always generous about money, but Agnes was not prepared for the warmth of his reply.

"There's no reason why I should not do it, as far as the money is concerned. I know you're hard up, or I shouldn't have thought of making the offer. But as a matter of fact, all the money you owe couldn't hurt me, and if you would rather, you're welcome to it free, gratis, and for nothing."

"You're very kind, Dolly, but I couldn't take your money for nothing."

"Bother the beastly money! You needn't make such a fuss about it!"

"I must."

"Why should you? It's nothing to me but something to spend, and if the laying out of a little cash clears away your troubles, you know how glad I am to do it. Now, are all the worries gone?"

"No, they're not: they wouldn't be even if I did let you pay my bills. Oh, Dolly, tell me that you're not in love with the other girl, and want to leave me for her!"

"Of course I'm not, you silly old thing," said Dolly with rough gallantry. "Change into an evening frock, and come and have supper at the 'Savoy': it'll buck you up no end."

"I can't, I look such a guy. I've been crying."

"So you have! Poor little girl! Well, put on your jacket and hat, and we'll motor down to Richmond: you'll have time to pull yourself together before you get there."

"No, you can sit here and talk to me for a while, but really my nerves are too unstrung for me to go anywhere to-night."

She felt that it was not safe for her to go anywhere; she did not feel sure of herself. Dolly was so sorry for her that he was gentle and sympathetic and did his best to take her mind off her troubles. Presently, seeing that she was tired, he rose to go: he had the

intuition not to draw her to him but merely to take her hands and give them a gentle pressure. She put her lips to his lightly, and then turned and went quickly out of the room. Dolly went staidly downstairs, full of the good resolutions which keep the pavement of Hell in repair. He went home and wrote a cheque much larger than was needed to pay her debts, and sent it to her in a letter, in which he told her that he was leaving town for some time, and should not feel comfortable unless she would accept a loan sufficient to relieve her from her money anxieties.

She received the letter at breakfast time. When she saw Dolly's handwriting, she turned ashy white; it was seldom that he put pen to paper, and, as she had seen him only a few hours before, she felt that the worst must have happened. She did not dare to open it until she had eaten a morsel of bacon and drunk her cup of coffee. Then she went slowly upstairs, with the letter unopened, in her hand. She did not tear the envelope open until she had closed her bedroom door behind her.

The blow seemed to have fallen; she was as stunned as if she had been struck down by a footpad in a lonely lane. The maid who came to make her bed half an hour later, and did not knock, thinking that she must have left the Club as it was long past her usual hour for going to business, found her standing dazed by her dressing-table, in grey despair. She roused her by saying: "You'll be awfully late this morning, won't you, Miss?" And Agnes put on her hat and coat in a feverish hurry.

She sent Luigi with a wire to the Taroberts about family bereavements, which served equally well to explain her conduct to the servants, and hailing a taxi, drove to Dolly's chambers.

Dolly was out; his man said that he was riding.

In her overwrought state she told herself that it was a lie: a well-trained servant will tell any lie. But she could not get behind his mask.

"He'll be back in half an hour, Miss. He's been a

*h*our now, and he never rides for more than a *h*our and a half. Won't you come in and sit down, Miss ? "

He was cordially respectful.

She frankly did not believe him ; the idea that Dolly had not played fair with her the night before, and was running away rather than explain, was uppermost in her mind. But she knew that a person of Dolly's lazy habits was not likely to go long without his man, so she decided to accept his invitation to sit down. She waited for the clue.

It came quicker than she expected. " Excuse me, Miss : Mr. Illington told me to pack our things."

" How long are you to be away for ? "

" A month was the order, Miss. But, when he says a month, it may be any time : a month means packing full kit."

" All right, Jenkins, get on with his ' things.' I'll sit down and wait a little."

" Very good, Miss. Will you have a paper, Miss ? I'm afraid Mr. Illington only takes in the *Sportsman*."

" Thank you, Jenkins." As her eyes would only have run over the words mechanically, whatever she had been reading, the *Daily Mail* would not have been more interesting.

She sat down and waited. Not one hour, but two hours passed. It was as she thought, Dolly had gone, and his man was to follow with the luggage, keeping their destination secret. If Dolly had gone from Victoria, very likely the man would go to Euston and get to Victoria *viâ* Willesden. She had heard this was a favourite device of elopers.

Every minute ticked out by the little travelling clock on the writing-desk was a torture to her. Her imagination ran riot : she was quite certain that she would never see Dolly again. Then at last, she heard the click of a latch-key, and the bang of a door. This was followed by a murmur of voices—Jenkins was explaining. At last Dolly came in, beautifully turned out, looking breezy and healthy with the exercise.

Agnes ran and buried herself in his arms: she did not care if Jenkins did come in. But Jenkins was far too well trained to come in, when a lady was there, till he was sent for.

"Oh, Dolly, don't go with her!"

"Go with who?"

"I don't know who she is. But oh, Dolly, don't go with her!"

"But I'm not going with anyone, little woman, except Jenkins!"

"Really and truly?"

"Really and truly."

The colour came back into Agnes's cheeks, and her lips curved into one of her irresistible smiles. "Then I've been making myself miserable about nothing," she said, trying to disengage herself.

But Dolly's arms were round her and he would not let her go. "I believe that you really care for me, Agnes," he said, in a sort of wonder.

Agnes's lids drooped under his gaze. Then she took her courage in both hands, and, raising her head, met his eyes straight.

Dolly's good resolutions fled away from him.

"Let us go together, Agnes," he said huskily. "I want you more than anything in the world."

Then his conscience made one more stand. He let her go. "Forgive me, my dear," he said. "I am a brute. I ought to ask you to marry me, but—it's so difficult to say, with your dear eyes looking into mine—only, well, somehow I've never thought of marrying, any of the girls—" he broke off hopelessly confused—"oh, you know what I'm trying to say! But you are different: I ought not to have spoken as I did just now. Will you forgive me, and forget it? I can't marry you—I wish to God I could—I'm booked to marry my little cousin, when she is twenty-one, to keep the estates together."

Agnes did not move; she was white to the lips, but she faced him without flinching.

"Can you forgive me, Agnes, and forget all about it?" urged Dolly, as she did not speak.

"Perhaps I don't want to forget," said Agnes, slowly.

Dolly put his hands on her shoulders, and looked deep into her eyes.

"But you wouldn't do such a thing."

"Yes, I think I would. I can't bear the thought of losing you, and I'm desperately tired of struggling with debts, and going to the shop every day of my life."

"Are you quite sure that you've made up your mind, little woman?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure."

Dolly gathered her into his arms. "I swear I'll run straight with you," he said.

Later he sent for his lawyer and insisted on Agnes sending for one on her side to draw up an agreement on the lines which Rosa had suggested. This was Thursday morning. By the evening the document was copied, and Dolly had been to the Bank of England with a broker to transfer four thousand pounds, from a block of Consols, to Agnes's name. In the interval, Agnes returned to the shop and begged to be excused attendance on Saturday, as she would feel better if she were able to get away for a long week-end.

"Have you somewhere to go to?" asked Madame Tarobert.

"Yes."

Madame asked no further questions. Being French, she regarded it as all for the best in the best of possible worlds, when one of her shop-girls suddenly became one of her customers. It was in fact, in her eyes, the chief career open to a girl, whose only capital lay in her good looks.

She had taken it rather as a foregone conclusion that the British code would have prevented Agnes Openshaw, who was distinctly a lady, from adopting a career for which Nature had endowed her so lavishly. It rather pleased her than otherwise that Agnes was bowing to circumstances.

Agnes went to the shop ready dressed for the journey. It did not signify being overdressed: none of the girls who could help it, lived on their salaries. She kept her own counsel; but the girls, who noticed how nice she looked, thought that Dolly must be motoring her somewhere, and chaffed her accordingly. She reddened under their chaff.

She was able to get away at six, and taxi'd down to Victoria, where Dolly met her and sent Jenkins to deposit her luggage in the cloakroom, while he took her into the early *table d'hôte*, which they have at the Victoria Palace Hotel for people who are going by the night boat.

As for herself, having put her hand to the plough, she was not going to be turned back by idle fears. She knew that she was going to have a life of wider opportunities to balance its drawbacks, and, as far as her reputation was concerned, Mrs. Grundy had long ago made out her account for what she was about to do.

The most disturbing element in her mind was doubt as to whether she would be seasick: she had never crossed the sea before.

Dolly had taken care to order everything she liked for dinner—her favourite dishes, her favourite champagne, her favourite liqueur. He was hoping that they would be able to get a compartment to themselves, but every seat in the train was filled, and the only berth on the steamer which he could get for her was in the ladies' cabin.

Agnes did not attempt to sleep in the hour and twenty minutes of the crossing. Her mind was more tumultuous than the sea, which was quite rough.

She had one great consolation—she was not sea-sick.

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET OF CLARENCE VERITY

AGNES did not return on the Monday, nor for many a Monday afterwards. She felt that she could not go back and face discovery by inches; she did the wise thing, she took kindly Madame Tarobert into her confidence, and begged her forgiveness for leaving her in the lurch.

"*Ma chère,*" came the reply, "do not trouble yourself. I have only to put an advertisement into the paper to get a hundred secretaries. The accounts I have always kept myself: I only told you what lies to write. You did it very nicely, and they were merely lies about Time, who has a broad back. I have written to tell your Club that you have whooping-cough, and that the account for your rooms, till you return, is to be sent every week to me: Mr. Illington must pay this to keep tongues quiet. I have also got a temporary secretary; she would be temporary in any case till I knew if she could hold her tongue."

The girl, who was supposed to have whooping-cough, bought new luggage with "A. I." on it at Paris, and a trousseau of all that a woman's heart could desire, and went to Switzerland, where no one found out that she was not Mrs. Illington, and she became the darling of the hotel, having plenty of money, good looks and good spirits. She was radiantly happy, because she was genuinely fond

of Dolly, and had nothing to do but to amuse herself and travel, and could be out in the air all day long if she chose. Her husband, for so she regarded him, was a splendid specimen of the dare-devil, hard-riding Englishman.

It was Lesley's bad fortune to lose sight of Agnes, and all her other friends at the same time. The Aylmers were likely to be in America for more than a year: Mary Strange was still hiding her failures in a cubicle: Ken Western was painting in Italy: Reggie Tirebuck and Peter Webbe seemed to have forgotten her existence; and Cotty Verity, the only one left, was becoming difficult.

She had obtained her post on *Last Week* so easily when Major Waugh died, and his cousin had listened to him so readily when he suggested her becoming Lucas Ord's secretary, that Verity imagined that somebody must be waiting round every corner to engage the desirable Lesley; but when he found that the supply of employers had suddenly run dry, he became desperate. With many hesitations and a good deal of confusion, he begged to be allowed to advance the money for her to take some training. "A few months in Kensington College, you know, and you could get certificates, which would make a good post as secretary a certainty. Do let me do it," he pleaded. But Lesley, with the memory of Agnes's flight fresh in her memory, was firm in her refusals. At another time he urged the stage as a profession. "If you would only let me splash about a little money for you to start with, I'm quite certain you would go right ahead!" Lesley remained adamant.

Clarence Verity was quite honest in his proposals of help; he was genuinely in love with Lesley and would have done everything in his power to make her life easier for her. As a matter of fact it was a long time before it dawned on him what a struggle she was having, for Lesley made light of her difficulty in finding work, and resolutely hid from him the knowledge that she was becoming desperate for ready money. She pawned most of her jewellery to pay her board-money at the Club, and, because lunch was not included in the bill, but provided as an

extra at the cost of sixpence per head, she went without it, except when she happened to lunch with him. He did not know this, of course.

Day after day passed, and still no postcard came from Mrs. Beddoes, or from the other agencies on whose books she had put her name, with the welcome promise of work.

During the whole weary time, more than two months, that she had been trying to get work, Mrs. Beddoes only offered her three posts, all of them unsuitable for one reason or another. The first was as secretary to a lady who ran a shop in connection with a large charity-home. The salary offered was small, barely enough for Lesley to live on at the Buckingham Palace Club, but she would have taken it gladly. An appointment was made, and Lesley set out with high hopes, only to have them dashed to the ground, because it transpired that the lady was in need of an experienced secretary with good speeds in shorthand and on the typewriter, and a knowledge of book-keeping. "I am afraid you will be no good to me, Miss Brydges," she said kindly. "I am sorry to have troubled you to come all this way—it is wasting your time as well as mine. I particularly told Mrs. Beddoes that I wanted a thoroughly experienced secretary, because the work is hard." Lesley smiled her apologies, and trudged back through the streets: she could not afford to take a bus both ways, as she had not been engaged.

Another time, after a silence of three weeks, she received a letter from the secretary offering her a post as resident nurse to a baby a month old. "To take entire charge and responsibility."

"But I have no experience in babies!" laughed Lesley to the other members of the Club who happened to be at the breakfast-table. While they were sympathizing with her, she horrified them by bursting into tears and running out of the room without touching her food: the strain of waiting was beginning to tell on her nerves.

The third was more disappointing still, because at first it sounded so promising. She received a letter from the Agency asking her to call there that morning, because

a lady who ran some tea-rooms in the City wanted an educated and attractive girl to help her. "The hours are easy, and though the salary is only twelve and sixpence a week you get a good deal of money in tips," wrote the secretary of this highly-respected Employment Agency. It happened that one of the members of the Club had been working in some City tea-rooms when Lesley first came to it. She had lost sight of her in the interval, but she remembered that this girl not only liked the work but did really earn quite a lot of money, beyond her salary, in tips. Besides, Mary had worked in a restaurant: Lesley decided to try for it: she went down to the City, an unexplored region—she had never been further east than St. Paul's before—and, after a little difficulty, found the tea-shop in question.

The aspect disappointed her. To begin with, the tea-rooms were underground, and the only entrance was down a flight of very dirty steps, littered with scraps of paper and burnt-out matches. It was a breezy day in March; little white clouds scudded across the sky, driven by the wind, sometimes crossing the path of the sun and casting their shadow on the earth before they wantoned away; a gleeful day! Lesley's thoughts were out on the Campagna; few things in Nature stirred her to deeper joy than the play of sun and shadow on the hills. So the dirty staircase with its odour of stale food was particularly repugnant. At the foot of it were several women chattering to a pale and unhealthy-looking young man with his hat on the back of his head, who stared insolently at Lesley as she passed. The women were as painted as the back row of the ballet; one of them called after Lesley, "Are you looking for Miss Leeder?"

"Yes," said Lesley.

"Well, she's not here now; but if you've come after that post as waitress, she left a message that you were to help at lunch-time; she would be in then and see if you would do."

Lesley hesitated.

"*Are* you after the job?"

"Yes."

"Well, go in that room there and ask them to give you an apron, and show you where to put your hat: I'll come and tell you what to do in a minute." With that the girl, she was only a girl, although she was unwieldily fat, and rouged and carmined like a belle of fifty, resumed her conversation with the pallid youth and the other girls, all of whom stood staring at Lesley.

For a moment Lesley felt a wild desire to escape into the sunlight up those horrid stairs, to which she longed to take a broom and sweep away the dust and refuse which had collected; then with a sort of desperate courage she turned away into the restaurant. There were about a dozen other girls standing or sitting about, who stared at her with curious eyes. When she stated her message, one of them languidly pointed out a recess where she could put her hat and coat, and another one fetched a cap and overall, which she flung to Lesley from half across the room, without glancing at her, because she wanted to go back to her interrupted argument with another girl on the subject of a man named "Harry." Lesley was left alone, much to her relief; she pinned on the cap and apron, and sat down by one of the little tables to await events.

Presently the group of girls, who had been standing at the foot of the staircase, came in with a good deal of noise and laughter: they were followed by several men in the regulation City dress of top hat and morning coat. A good deal of chaff ensued: everyone seemed to know everyone else.

Soon the restaurant was quite full: the girl who had spoken to Lesley at the foot of the stairs, and who seemed to be one of the head waitresses, told her to keep beside her and help with her tables. Lesley was thankful to be given any task: she found it particularly trying to stand inactive in the midst of the bustle, and she noticed the way the men were looking at her. Presently a woman, whom she took to be Miss Leeder, came in, and sat down at a desk near the fan-light.

Lesley was told to attend to the wants of a stout, middle-

aged man, who came in rather late and seated himself at a table half-way down the room. She went up to ask him what he would take, and was met with a surprised stare, and the greeting, "Hullo, little girl, you're new, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Lesley briefly. "What will you order, sir?"

"Bring me anything you like, my dear, and then come back and talk to me," said the man with a chuckle.

Lesley flushed angrily, more at the look which accompanied them than the words themselves. She had to lean across the table to get the menu, and, in a second, he put his arm round her waist, and made a playful attempt to kiss her. Lesley wrenched herself free and left him; she heard a titter from the next table.

"Have you served that man yet?" demanded the girl with the painted cheeks a few minutes later.

"No," said Lesley hotly, "and I'm not going to: he insulted me."

"Pooh, my dear, that's not the tone to take in *this* shop," retorted the other. "There, he's looking at you now; go and beg his pardon prettily, and ask him what he wants."

"I won't go near him," said Lesley, infuriated by the nsolence of the man's stare.

The painted girl winked at another waitress, who was standing by, and went up to take the man's order herself. Then she went down the room and spoke to Miss Leeder. When she came back she told Lesley that Miss Leeder wished to speak to her. With head held high, Lesley walked down the restaurant to the manageress.

"There is a complaint against you already," said Miss Leeder coldly.

"I am sorry," answered Lesley, "but I can't wait on that man: I did go to take his order, but he insulted me."

"You little fool; it's no use your taking that tone with me," said Miss Leeder harshly. "Go and wait on him this instant, and politely too, or leave my restaurant."

Lesley said nothing: she turned on her heel, and walked back the entire length of the dining-room to that small and evil-smelling recess, where she had left her coat and hat. She took off the apron with trembling fingers, and dressed for the street. When she was ready she folded up the apron, and carrying it and the cap in her hand, passed down the room to the manageress's table again. All the girls and most of the men stared after her. "This is the property you lent me," she said coolly, "I am afraid that I shall not suit you." Her face was painfully flushed, with shame and the heat of that inferno, but her eyes were as cold as steel. As she went up the stairs into the sunlight she heard what seemed in her overstrung state a roar of laughter from the restaurant. But she did not care so long as she was out of it, although she found, to her dismay, that the tears were running down her cheeks while she rode back along Fleet Street on the top of an omnibus. She could not walk, she was so tired and disappointed, and faint from want of food.

Clarence Verity came to see her that afternoon. When she told him her experience of the morning, his blue eyes flashed fire. "Do you mean to tell me," he raged, "that a decent employment agency, run by ladies for the employment of ladies, sent you to a place like that! Oh, I call it disgusting! That restaurant's notorious! Why, you can't be there a week without being offered a Saturday to Monday at Brighton, and what's more, if you refuse the beastly attentions of the men, you just don't keep your post. And they know it!"

After this Lesley gave up all hope of hearing of suitable work from the agencies, and devoted her time and energy to answering advertisements in the Daily Papers. Clarence had long ago insisted on ordering a file of them to be sent to her every morning. She allowed him to do this, because she could not possibly afford them herself, and she hated to tramp up to the Free Library to search through them. But none of them gave her any encouragement, she was unskilled, untrained, uneducated for business, and they wanted an expert.

Then Lesley, almost at the end of her resources, thought of Tirebuck. She wrote to him, saying that she was out of work, and asking him if he knew of anyone wanting research work done for him. He invited her to lunch at the "Pall Mall," and Lesley, much against her will, accepted his invitation. Her clothes were really shabby now, and the reindeer gloves, which she had been wearing all the winter, were black and shiny at the finger-tips.

Reginald was delighted to see her. He had no idea that she was in low water. A child of fortune himself, he did not dream that Lesley was genuinely in need of work. His life did not bring him in touch with people who were dependent for their daily bread upon their wages. He was as anxious as ever to help, but he knew of no research work. Timidly Lesley asked him if he thought she had any chance of getting journalism to do, on the strength of her experience on *Last Week*. Reginald was not very hopeful, but he gave her various introductions, and, when they parted, begged in his conventional and yet charming manner, that she would not let such a long time elapse before their next meeting.

Nothing came of the introductions. Perhaps Lesley had not enough spirit in her in these days to carry her through even the outer portals of the journalistic world. But one morning, while she was searching the columns of the *Daily Telegraph*, she came upon this advertisement. "Model. Tall elegant young lady wanted by Court dressmaker to wear model gowns; only those with experience need apply."

It was true that she had no experience, but you do not look for work in London long without learning to disregard the essentials of an advertisement. Also she recollected the words of the woman who kept her favourite shop in the Via Sistina, whose exquisite lingerie-robes and blouses form a web that entraps most of the tourist-flies. "Ah, my dear," she had said, one morning when Lesley was choosing summer dresses, "if ever you want work, come to me, and I will take you as *mannequin*; every gown that people see on you will be bought at once."

Lesley set out with hope in her heart. She knew the Maison Poupart by name, but she had never actually been to the shop. When she pushed open the carved and panelled door she found herself in a large airy room, almost empty, with Louis Quinze settees and chairs ranged round the light, painted walls. She hesitated in the doorway, and a slim little Frenchwoman in a blouse and skirt detached herself from a group of people, who were talking at a table in the corner, and came forward. She smiled at Lesley. "What can I do for you, Mademoiselle ?" she asked.

"Can I speak to Madame Poupart ?" said Lesley shyly.

"But certainly. Mademoiselle will take a seat ?" and the Frenchwoman ushered Lesley to one of the elegant settees between the tall lace-curtained windows. She went back to the little group of women, who were talking to a man sitting at the writing-table. There was a pause, and everyone turned to look at Lesley: then a woman, wearing a hat and a fashionable coat and skirt, came towards her; Lesley rose nervously.

"Is it Madame Poupart ?" she asked.

The lady bowed, regarding Lesley all the while with hard eyes.

"You are advertising for a model, I think," said Lesley. "And I have come to know if I shall be of any good."

"You have come at the wrong time," said Madame Poupart coldly, glancing at the clock; "the appointment was from ten to twelve: it is half-past twelve now."

"I am sorry: I did not see your advertisement until rather late, and I came as soon as I could," said Lesley apologetically.

"What experience have you had ?"

"None," said Lesley. "But I can generally wear model dresses without alteration."

"How do you know you can, if you have had no experience ?"

Lesley was nonplussed; she did not like to say that she had bought them, though in fact the coat and skirt which she was wearing was a model from Martial et Armand,

old-fashioned now, it is true, but still unmistakable in its cut.

Madame Poupart looked her up and down. "Turn round," she said.

Lesley walked away, and turned round again, rather conscious of the eyes of the little group in the inner room, who had stopped talking, and were listening to the conversation.

"It is just possible that you might suit me," said Madame carelessly. "But first I must see you in one of my dresses. Miss Hill, take this young lady up to the fitting-rooms, and try on a gown."

A pretty girl in a model's wrapper took Lesley upstairs, where they were joined by the little Frenchwoman, and a great discussion followed as to which dress she should try on. At length they decided on a delightfully simple and elegant blue afternoon gown, whose soft folds and chiffons were like balm to Lesley's beauty-loving soul; there was no question that the dress was a success; the Frenchwoman was enraptured. Lesley followed her downstairs to the reception-room, rather dreading the ordeal of facing those curious eyes which were waiting for her return. But a glance at the mirror gave her courage, and she stepped slowly forward, turning and posing, as she had seen the models pose many times in her favourite shops. It was the first time that she had been inside such an establishment since she left Rome. And now what a difference!

There was a murmur of approval, and Madame Poupart came forward to pull a fold into its place, and look carefully into the fit of the gown.

"Madame, it is perfect," said the Frenchwoman, "it fits her absolutely; the only difference is that she is a little slighter across the shoulders at the back."

"It goes well enough," said Madame, "but I should like to see her in another dress, a plainer one."

Lesley went upstairs, and, this time, put on a severe tailor-made gown of blue serge. When she went down again, the salon was empty except for the stout elderly

man whom she took to be the husband of Madame. He came forward at once and examined the fit, stroking her hips and back, in the process, in a manner which made Lesley's cheeks burn. She was still unused to the familiarities of business. The man watched her under half-closed lids. "You are perhaps not tall enough," he said curtly, "but Madame is returning from the workrooms in a moment."

With that he left her alone, and Lesley stood by the window, looking down on the traffic in the street below, wishing that her cheeks would stop burning so uncomfortably, hating herself too, in the tight-fitting blue serge dress, whose collar was uncomfortably stiff and high.

After about a quarter of an hour Madame Poupart came back. "You will do," she said coldly, hardly glancing at the blue gown, "and I shall expect you on Monday at nine o'clock: the salary I am offering is seventeen shillings a week, with lunch and tea; the hours are from nine till six-thirty, except that, every alternate week, you have to stay later because you share the duties of 'packer' with the other model. But even then you would get away by half-past seven unless there was some special order to put through."

Lesley hesitated. "I am afraid I shall find it rather difficult to live on seventeen shillings a week," she said.

Madame looked at her sharply. "I am giving you a fair price," she said curtly, "and surely you have someone with whom you can live. Have you no parents or relations?"

"No," said Lesley, "not in England."

"Friends, then?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Ah!" said Madame Poupart with her curious cold smile, "I am sorry. Well, that is all I can offer you." She paused and then added, with a peculiar emphasis, "Most models, you know, have *someone* to keep them."

"I see," said Lesley, "then I suppose I must give up the idea of being a model. I am sorry to have wasted your time." As she spoke, she looked straight into the

calculating eyes of the successful dressmaker, who could offer such shameful wages to the women whom she wished to work for her.

Madame shrugged her shoulders. "It is rather stupid," she said, indifferently. "You have a beautiful figure, and probably you would be quite successful in time. But I cannot offer you more: in fact I have several girls on my list who are very anxious to take the post at that salary." She turned away and crossed over to her writing-table.

"What are you going to do?" asked the little Frenchwoman, who had listened to the whole conversation.

"Take off this dress; it is stifling me!" said Lesley.

Upstairs the other model girl said, "Has Madame engaged you?"

"She engaged me," said Lesley, "but I can't come; it's not possible to live on that money! Where are your clothes to come from? Why, I could not have my boots mended, or pay for my necessities like laundry and postage stamps, to say nothing of ever having anything to spend on pleasure."

"Haven't you got a home?" asked the girl.

"No," said Lesley.

"It's difficult if you have no one to keep you," said the model.

* * * * * *

"Oh, Cotty, I am sick of being a woman," cried Lesley, that afternoon when he came, according to his usual custom, to try and give her some pleasure after her day's round, which should banish her troubles. "It is nothing but disappointment all the time. Do you think I was wrong not to take that post as model, in spite of the low wage; after all, seventeen shillings a week would be better than nothing."

"No," said he stoutly, "you were quite right: the whole system is rotten: that isn't a living wage. If only you women would stick together in a sort of Trades

Unionism and hold out for a fair wage, there wouldn't be half this trouble, you know."

She was in despair: she made no secret of her poverty to the other girls in the Club, and, as they had always liked her for her unaffectedness and generosity, they were on the look-out for posts for her. . . . There was a foreign girl in the Club, a Miss Matthiae, who kept urging her to go into a shop. "Any girl with pretensions to good looks can get work of some sort in the shops," she said. The idea was repugnant to Lesley, but she took her courage in both hands and faced the situation. As it was, she was so much in debt that she would have either to pawn her gold watch or else leave the Club. She found, after many wanderings, that several houses could give her work, but they were not prepared to pay her more than from ten to eighteen shillings a week for it. At last she went to Staidburn's in answer to an advertisement for a model. The manager was pleased with her appearance, but the buyer engaged her grudgingly. The salary was thirty pounds a year and she was to live in. Lesley decided that anything would be better than the constant worry of ways and means. She agreed to start work on the following Monday, and went straight from Staidburn's to her usual pawnbroker, to raise what money she could on her watch to pay her bills at the Club.

Cotty was disconsolate when he heard that she was going into a shop, and was secretly dismayed at the smallness of the sum which she was to earn. But he was glad to see her in better spirits. They planned out some happy days together, resolved to make the most of what was likely to be Lesley's last holiday for a long time.

One day when they were having tea in his chambers, he showed her a water-colour sketch of his castle in the north. It presented high midsummer; at the end of an avenue of old oaks there was a reedy lake with an island in its centre approached by a long causeway and a drawbridge. On this island was an old black and white building, half castle, half fortified mansion.

"What's that, Cotty?"

"The house in which I was born: my father bought it from the Ince people."

"Who does it belong to now?"

"It is my home," and he added almost sadly, "when I am there."

"Why aren't you always there? It looks so beautiful. Surely you would rather be there than just knocking about in London, and there must be plenty of links within motoring distance, if it's Lancashire."

"It's Cheshire."

"Well, Cheshire."

"Because it's so lonely."

"I shouldn't have thought you would have been afraid of lonely places."

"I'm not afraid of anything; but it makes me think of what it would have been like with you for its mistress."

"Why me?"

"You know."

She was silent, and coloured.

"You must have wondered why I have never asked you to be my wife: you know how fond I am of you."

"Indeed, I have never given it a thought."

It was his turn to colour.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said quickly. "But why should a man in your position have thought of marrying a girl who was willing to take any odd job to keep body and soul together?"

"Because he loved her," he said simply.

"In the usual way—as someone to go round and enjoy himself with—to play golf with and dance with—and, if she would allow it, make love to, when she had a fit of loneliness on," said Lesley, with just a trace of bitterness in her voice. The memory of Agnes rankled.

"Have I ever tried to make love to you?"

"No, you haven't: you knew my pride."

"Doesn't it count for any merit?"

"Yes; it enables me to have one of the pleasantest friendships of my life: I have valued you awfully as a friend, Cotty."

"Then may I tell you something?"

"Yes," she said. She saw by his manner that the disclosure was to be something portentous: she thought that he was going to ask her to marry him. She was not in love with him, though she admired his strength and skill in games, and he had proved himself such a dear friend to her all through her troubles, always thoughtful, and careful never to offend, or to trespass in any way on their intimacy, that she nearly loved him. In the pause before he spoke she wondered what her answer would be. The future stretched so drearily in front of her.

"I am a married man."

It came as a great shock to her, though he had never done anything that a married man might not presumably do in a state of society, where men and women, who liked each other, were accustomed to go about together unchaperoned. If he had kissed her, the people in her set would, many of them, have been less surprised to hear of it than to be told that he had never tried to kiss her.

But it came as a blow to her to hear that he was married, and she meant to know more about his wife before she let him go about with her again. If she was a nice woman, who had merely ceased to attract him, and did all a wife could do to hold him, Lesley, poor as she was in friends as in everything else, meant to have no more to do with him, except in her presence and with her approval—in fact to be on the same terms with the Veritys as she was with the Aylmers. She was not surprised at never having seen Mrs. Verity at receptions; many husbands came without their wives, and wives without their husbands, because the basis of these parties was semi-intellectual, and unintellectual and hyper-intellectual people were bored by them.

"Tell me about your wife."

"My wife when I met her was a beautiful woman, far better-born than myself: she was a dashing sportswoman and her spiritedness made her the admiration of all Cheshire. She liked me because I was good at sports, and her people asked me to their place a great deal, and

made me much more of a friend than my position in the county warranted, because they belonged to the old County Families who set their faces against trade."

"Why should they?"

"Because they are too poor to live at the same rate, and their only way to maintain their position is to exclude Liverpool and Manchester altogether." He continued, "I was Manchester; our mills are in a little town near Manchester, but they received me on the footing of an Egerton or a Tollemache because the girl liked me. I was allowed to see a great deal of her—as much as any of them would have been, I suppose. As might have been expected—I was only a boy of one-and-twenty, one of those great people, a 'varsity man with no parents, and a guardian who only worried about the money side—I fell over head and ears in love with her. She reciprocated my affection, and I went to ask her father's permission. 'My dear Verity,' he said, 'I've no objection to you as a son-in-law; you're a good sort of Englishman, and you have a fine property. I should like to see my daughter married; she's the kind of girl who needs a husband badly for her happiness. But I can't let you marry her without letting you know that she's been in an asylum.'

"'But she's as sane as any of us, sir.'

"'So she is; she seems to have got over it altogether. Still it would not be honourable to let you marry her without putting you in possession of the fact.'

"I let him see how grateful I was to him, but you may imagine that it did not alter my resolution. A few months afterwards we were married, and all the 'big pots' in the county lent their presence to the ceremony."

"What a shame!"

"You don't mean that it was a shame their coming to the wedding?"

"No, that they should have let you go so far without warning you."

"I think they did feel a bit cheap about it themselves, and that's why they rolled up so well to the wedding. Still it was nobody's business; they liked Ursula awfully,

and they felt how a dashing girl like that would hate to be an old maid. The boys in their own families knew all about the asylum business, so they did not come forward."

"But what was her mother doing?"

"I have no doubt that my mother-in-law did deliberately set out to catch me, and that's the reason why I was asked so much to the house. I don't believe that my father-in-law was in it at the beginning, though he may have been salving his conscience with the knowledge that, if it came to anything, he meant to tell me flat out about the asylum before he gave his consent."

"He must have been, or he'd have nipped it in the bud."

"At any rate I believe that her mother deliberately planned the whole thing, and, if she knew that her husband meant to tell me, relied upon my being too fond of the girl to give her up."

"She ought to be sent to prison for it!" cried Lesley hotly.

"The wicked thing about her was that she was willing to risk our having children to inherit the madness, which was only averted by an awful tragedy. I don't think that she had the slightest idea that Ursula would go off her head again: I think she believed that marriage would be her salvation."

"Is your wife still alive?"

"I was coming to that. Everything went well till a child was born. Ursula was a darling: she was affectionate as well as beautiful and high-spirited. But in the birth of the child something gave way in her brain and she relapsed into total insanity. In the very first paroxysm she murdered the child, and, as soon as she was sufficiently recovered, had to be removed to a house of detention for criminal lunatics."

Lesley's sympathies were deeply touched.

"Is she there now?"

"In another one, yes. Well, to cut a long story short, I waited for three years and then I brought an action for

divorce. My father-in-law and mother-in-law both of them supported me and were prepared to go into the witness-box on my behalf. I wished to show the world that I had the family consent; the doctors from the asylum proved the fact of madness, and gave it as their opinion that a recovery was totally impossible. Everything seemed to be going right for me when the Attorney-General, who led on behalf of the Crown, asked me if it was true that my father-in-law had acquainted me with the fact that Ursula had already been in an asylum and, when I admitted it, turned to the judge and claimed that this deprived me of the right of divorce. The judge said he would look into the matter and give his decision on the following morning."

"And what did he decide?"

"As soon as he re-entered the court, he pronounced that the objection was fatal, and dismissed the case. So here I am landed for life with an insane wife, who can never recover."

"Poor Cotty!"

"Lesley," he said, coming over and taking her hand. "I want to say something very dreadful to you."

A feeling of emptiness under the heart told her of impending misfortune: she did not withdraw her hand, but stood looking him in the eyes.

"What is it, Cotty?" she asked: she was never lacking in moral courage.

"You see that I cannot marry you."

"Yes," she said, briefly.

"And now, when you have to face poverty, is the very moment when I want horribly to marry you, to give you a comfortable home and the chance to enjoy the sort of life you were born to."

Lesley said nothing, but her eyes implored him not to go on.

"Lesley, are you strong enough to come and live with me as my wife—anywhere in the world you like. I will settle my whole fortune on you, so that I cannot leave you without making myself a beggar."

She withdrew her hand from his slowly: he knew his doom, though she did not speak for a minute or two.

Then she said, "I don't take this as an insult, Cotty, though it is the greatest insult you could offer to a woman, especially a woman who has lost her position by poverty. I pass that because I know how fond of me you are, and that you would never have done it, if you had understood. But you must never see me again, because it is not possible for me to contemplate being—your wife in this way—and necessity might tempt me sorely."

He looked like a man who has received a fatal wound, but has not lost consciousness.

"Don't go this minute!" he cried, "if I am never to see you again."

"No, I won't," she said simply. "I'll stay with you for another hour, as if you were merely saying good-bye—like a soldier who is going to join his regiment in India—because I am very fond of you, Cotty. I'm not sending you away as a punishment because—oh, well, because you have offered me all you have to offer; but I am afraid of myself, that if things go wrong with me, I might feel tempted."

"Oh, Lesley why can't you feel tempted?" he asked, in a low voice.

Lesley did not answer for some moments. Then she spoke slowly.

"There are two reasons—because though I'm very fond of you I have not the supreme love which would be the only excuse for taking this step, and because, don't be hurt by this—if I did it, I should cut myself off from everyone but you—because, wherever I was, in London, in the country, in England, in Italy, in Australia, I should be living on a desert island with you. We should be wholly dependent on each other for society and occupations. And, Cotty—I don't feel that I love you well enough for that."

"And am I never to see you again?" he asked miserably.

"Not while your wife is alive."

"Then I should have the right to ask you what I have asked just now. Would you marry me?"

"I don't think so. Oh, Cotty, don't talk about it, please!"

"What am I to do?" he asked desperately.

"Go round the world for a year. It will help you to forget, and make it impossible for us to meet. It's no good staying, Cotty, I'm not going to do it. If I felt that I was giving way, I'd poison myself."

When the time came for parting he said: "May I come and see you a year from to-day?"

"Yes," said Lesley after a little hesitation.

"Where shall I find you?"

"God knows!"

"London is a very large place."

"Oh, I suppose I shall be at the Club, or be seeing someone at the Club from time to time."

"Won't you promise to leave your address there this day year."

"Yes, I will promise that. And now I must say good-bye, Cotty." She held out her hand. He took it in both of his, and looked at her wistfully.

Lesley's eyes wavered before his. "May I kiss you?" he said, simply. "I am going away for a whole year, and it will mean so much to me."

Lesley did not speak, but her eyes gave him consent, and their lips met in a kiss.

"Oh, Cotty!" she cried, "why have you spoilt things? I shall miss you horribly!"

CHAPTER XIII

LESLEY BECOMES A MODEL IN A SHOP

AT nine o'clock on Monday morning Lesley presented herself at the office of the manager of Staidburn's. Her box—she had packed away most of her belongings and entrusted them to the care of the kind-hearted woman who presided over the Buckingham Palace Club—had been sent off on Friday by Carter Paterson. She walked to the shop; by the time that she had settled her account with the Club she had only a few shillings left to last her over the month, till she could draw the first instalment of her salary.

When she pushed open the swing-doors and walked down the shop, it happened to be in the dress-material department, a shopwalker stepped forward and asked what he could do for her. The irony of the situation helped to raise Lesley's spirits.

"I am looking for the manager's office," she said.

The shopwalker gave a little stare, and seemed about to ask a question, then changed his mind, and told her which way to go. It was too early for customers, and Lesley was afraid that the manager might not yet have come. But he was seated at his desk, deep in a pile of correspondence. He frowned when he saw Lesley, as though he was trying to recollect her business. Then he touched a bell and told the boy, who answered it, to ask one of the young ladies from the "Mantles" to come down and speak to him. He did not ask Lesley to be seated.

Presently a gentle-faced girl came into his office.

"Good morning, Miss Devon," he said. "This is Miss Brydges, the new model for the coats and skirts: will you look after her, please?"

The girl smiled at Lesley: she seemed quite friendly, but she did not speak much while she was showing her the dressing-rooms, where Lesley took off her hat and coat. Then she conducted her downstairs to the Mantle salon, and spoke to the shopwalker, a tall, weedy young man with dark eyes and very shiny black hair, but a whimsical smile which gave a certain charm to his face. While he was listening to her, they were joined by another man, who glared at Lesley with unfriendly eyes, and then demanded roughly of Miss Devon why she had been so long out of the show-room: he hardly listened to her explanation, but turned to Lesley with a sneer on his mean little face.

"So you are the new model! And a nice trial you are going to be to me, I can see. Never even been in business before! Can't think what they are trying to do up at the office, making me engage girls with no experience as models! Turn round!" he added abruptly.

Lesley did so with flushed cheeks. Her courage had evaporated: she needed all her strength of will not to break into tears; somehow this common little bully's unexpected attack seemed to have broken her nerve.

Her tormentor gave a little snort of derision. "Call yourself a model, do you? A precious lot of *our* coats you will be able to wear! They ought to have sent you to the haberdashery!"

Some of the girls, who were standing about in the department, turned away with a titter, but, in the midst of her humiliation, Lesley noticed that the greater number of them were regarding the man with open dislike.

"Now, then, understand, my girl," went on the coarse voice, "you have come here to work. Don't think to put on any of your la-di-da airs of fine ladyship here: you'll find soon enough that they don't pay in business."

Having humbled her to the dust, he turned away and

shouted across the room to a girl, who was resting against the arm of a chair.

"Why are you sitting down, Miss Black? How many times am I to tell you that it looks bad for customers to see the assistants lolling about the department. Why don't you get something to do instead of idling?"

"But there is nothing to do, Mr. Urfont," said the girl.

"Nothing to do! What do you mean by nothing to do, when there are at least a dozen dresses lying on that seat over there!"

There were only two in fact, and another assistant was already hanging them up in one of the big presses which lined the room. Miss Black went across and made a show of helping her. No one seemed to take any notice of the ill-temper of Mr. Urfont, though they all made a pretence of moving about the stands, or pushing the garments from one side of the cases, in which they were kept, to the other. Presently he went out of the salon. Everyone immediately relaxed, and Lesley, with her cheeks still flushed with shame and dismay at such an unwarranted attack, became the cynosure of all eyes. She was conscious of looking rather conspicuous in her shabby blue serge skirt and white muslin shirt. All the other girls were either dressed in black, or in smartly tailored grey skirts and neat crêpe-de-chine shirt-waists, to match. They were the other models.

Miss Devon came up to her and said reassuringly, "You mustn't mind our Mr. Urfont, Miss Brydges. He is the worst-tempered man in Staidburn's."

"Does he belong to this department?"

"Yes, he is the buyer."

Lesley did not know what an important individual a buyer was, but she soon realized that he was to be the fly in her ointment.

Whether it was that her air of quiet dignity irritated him, or that he recognized that she was in fact a lady, his mean little soul, full of class hatred, and swelled by the knowledge that in his department his word was law, could not resist the temptation of humiliating her: it

was evident that Mr. Urfont "had his knife into her" from the beginning. Nothing that she did was right in his eyes. He looked round for her directly he entered the department, and hardly ever failed to shout some meaningless order at her, and if she was doing nothing, and this happened too often for Lesley's liking—for there were hours upon hours when there was literally nothing to occupy the time of the dozen assistants who lounged about the Mantle Department—he would set her some ridiculous task, which he invariably forgot five minutes later.

But on the whole the first few days at Staidburn's, which Lesley had dreaded from the bottom of her heart, passed more easily than she expected. The big rush of the season had not yet commenced and, being only a junior model, she did not come much into contact with the customers. On the other hand she had too much to occupy her mind to allow her to repine; she had to master the meaning of all the business ciphers on the tickets of the coats and skirts—Staidburn's did not mark their goods with plain prices which the customer could read: she had to learn the correct way to fold and arrange them, and, most difficult of all, she had to memorize more or less accurately the whole stock, so that when a pile of garments was left flung on chair or settee, after the inspection of a customer, she could return each one to its appointed place. Then there were the names and faces of all the fitters and skirt-hands and saleswomen and *mannequins* to remember, so that she could know whom to go to, when she was sent on a message by one or the other.

Besides her duties in the show-room, where every garment had to be tidied away as soon as it had been rejected by a customer, and where the lay-figures had to be dressed every morning, and their clothes folded away in layers of tissue paper at night, she had to take her turn in going a round of inspection to the work-rooms to search for model suits which had been kept too long by the tailors. This she found intensely interesting, although she had a bad attack of stage-fright over her first few visits. For on these rounds of inspec-

tion she found herself in touch with a class of people, of whose existence she had never dreamt—the human machinery round whose labour the whole mechanism of Staidburn's revolved. The rooms in which they worked at huge bare tables, seamed and lined by shears and tracing-wheels, were hot and evil-smelling; the occupants were mostly foreign Jews, who objected to fresh air on principle, and kept the large, dusty windows closed; and in some of them were furnaces for the heating of the huge irons and presses of the tailors.

Lesley paid them her first visit in company with Miss Devon, who had been detailed, the morning after her arrival, to make the round of inspection. The advent of the two models was the signal for a good deal of rough chaff. Miss Devon explained to Lesley that certain model dresses were lent out of the show-rooms to the tailors, for them to copy, whenever customers ordered a suit from one of the models. But the tailors were never allowed to keep these suits for long, and it was part of the model girls' business to know the whereabouts of every garment.

When the door opened, the tailors and their apprentices immediately smuggled the coat or skirt under the piles of material at which they were working, and strenuously denied that they had it in their possession. Lesley, unaccustomed to the ways of work-rooms, was rather dismayed by their chaff. But Miss Devon allowed it to flow round her unnoticed, keeping the meanwhile a sharp look-out on the tables. When they had exhausted the first round of their wit, she either pounced upon the suit for which she was looking, and beat a retreat, with a little good-humoured repartee at their expense, or else she argued with them, giving them back every whit as good as they gave, until they allowed her to take away the garment.

When once she had overcome the strangeness of these people, Lesley found that she had no difficulty with them. Chaff she had in plenty, but she was so diffident under it, and so good-tempered, that she never failed to find some champion to side with her. It was the languid young

ladies of the show-room, with their airs and graces, in work-room parlance, their "swank," who came off the worst in their encounters with the work-people.

The fatigue of being on her feet from nine in the morning till half-past six at night, with short intervals for lunch and tea, kept Lesley from being actively unhappy in her leisure hours. She was very lonely; the girls in the show-room, recognizing that she was in some way different from themselves, seemed to view her with suspicion at first, although she became popular enough with most of them later on, when they had proved that she was neither trying to be superior nor to put on "side." Being one of the last arrivals, she was on the second list for luncheon and tea, which meant that she did not go up for the former until a quarter to two—a very trying morning, for she breakfasted at eight. She sat at a table with the other model girls, from her own department, and the "costumes" and "furs," and, finding that it was the custom for them to read at meal-times, when they did not want to talk, she fell into the habit of bringing one of her precious books with her. She was too tired to read at night for the first week or two.

Most of the girls at Staidburn's lived in—not over the shop, but in a series of boarding-houses which had been bought by the firm in a neighbouring square. There were about twenty girls in each house, of different ages and situations, ranging from the small apprentices to the smart "young ladies," who condescended to "model" and serve customers in the costume or fur department. Some of the bedrooms accommodated as many as six girls; but Lesley found, to her relief, that she was put into a small room at the top of the house in company with two little 'prentices. They were only fourteen years old, and, as they were asleep when she went to bed, and had to be at the shop a full half-hour before the older girls, and rose proportionately early, she had more privacy than she expected. They were clean, and nicely-behaved children, who soon, after the manner of their kind, developed an unbounded admiration for Lesley,

when they found that she neither ordered them about nor condescended to them.

One of them, called Maggie, and generally spoken of affectionately as "little Maggie," because she was so small and slightly built that she seemed to be not more than twelve, was a constant source of delight to Lesley. She was very delicate looking, with large, soulful eyes, and when she lay asleep at night, her hair curled in damp rings round her blue-veined forehead in a way which somehow caught at Lesley's heart; she was so fragile when she slept, and the indomitable Cockney spirit no longer animated her face! Every morning she woke long before either of her room-mates, and, wrapping a faded flannel jacket round her thin shoulders, pored over the books which she brought week by week from her home.

"What are you reading, Maggie?" asked Lesley, the first morning.

Maggie, startled out of her dreamland, clutched her wrapper closer about her shoulders.

"It's 'Adam Bede,' Miss Brydges."

"'Adam Bede'!" echoed Lesley in astonishment.

"Yes, Miss," breathed Maggie, forgetful of Lesley's commands that she should be called by her name. "It's a beautiful story."

And another time it would be Shakespeare, and another "Nicholas Nickleby"—she knew her Dickens from finish to start, and loved to talk about him, and she had whole passages of Shakespeare by heart.

Lesley saw little of the other girls in the house. Supper was a "movable feast"; they could have it directly they came in from business or at any hour up till eight o'clock. The result was that the girls for the most part came in in twos and threes, despatched their meal and scattered to their rooms or their pleasures—mostly their pleasures, for with the exception of the apprentices, hardly a girl spent the evening indoors. Nearly all of them had their "boys," and, supper over, they went away in their neat tailor-made suits and smart little hats to theatres or

cinemas or exhibitions, or just for bus-rides. Sometimes Lesley would meet the model girls, who were more ambitious in their tastes, coming downstairs in evening frocks, and often in elaborate cloaks, on their way to dances and supper-parties. She was amazed at the extravagance with which they dressed, and the ceaseless round of their gaiety. On Saturdays and Sundays they were out all day with their beaux, and there was a good deal of rivalry, and more or less friendly gossip, especially when one of the "young ladies" was seen descending the narrow stairs of the boarding-house, dressed in a smart motoring bonnet and coat, to meet her squire—not one of Staidburn's people—who was waiting for her in his car below.

Lesley was not intimate with any of the girls in her house. It happened that none of the models or saleswomen from her department were there. And for the first week or two she was so weary at night that she only waited long enough for her little room-mates to fall asleep, before she tumbled into her own hard bed. On Sundays she did her laundry in the wash-house, which was put at the girls' disposal with every convenience for use, because she could not afford to pay for it to be sent to the wash. She had been obliged to buy corsets and slippers for her model work, which had been entered to her account at reduced prices, but which had to be paid for by instalments out of her meagre salary.

Oh, that wash-house! It took Lesley months before she could laugh at her early disastrous efforts at laundry-work. She had not the slightest notion how to launder; it seemed to her that soap and hot water and plenty of rubbing should achieve good results, but her linen became yellower and yellower, and when she attempted to iron, she either left a brown scorch behind, or found a trail of iron-mould on the raised embroidery of handkerchiefs and underlinen. On one disastrous day she boiled a pair of brown stockings with her whole store of handkerchiefs, discolouring them hopelessly. But this proved to be her salvation, for little Maggie, who had developed a silent worship of Lesley, exclaimed over the pile of hand-

kerchiefs, which Lesley, not troubling to iron, for they were impossible to use in that condition, had left on her table. She was dressing in the morning, and Lesley was lying in bed, waiting until the children went downstairs before she got up herself. "Oh, Miss Brydges, whatever *have* you done to your handkerchiefs!"

"I did a stupid thing," said Lesley. "I boiled a pair of brown stockings with them!"

The other girl tittered, but little Maggie turned round with a sudden flame of anger in her blue eyes. "You be quiet, Annie! There's nothing for you to go grinning at! How should the likes of Miss Brydges know how to wash 'er clothes?"

"I ought to know, Maggie," protested Lesley, trying to throw oil on the troubled waters, "it's my stupidity."

But Maggie, who had been watching the result of Lesley's laundering for some time, and longed to help, but had not dared to proffer her services, did not mean to let this opportunity slip.

"I'll get that stain out for you, Miss Brydges," she said.

"Can it be got out?" asked Lesley, much relieved.

"Of course it can. I'll do it when I get back from business to-night," said the child, glowing with pleasure at the thought of doing some service to the adored one.

"No, Maggie," said Lesley firmly; "you have your own laundry to do, and that's quite enough for one small girl. You tell me how to get the stain out and I'll do it myself: I ought to learn, you know."

Then Maggie, rather breathless with her daring, made her great offer. She breathed heavily, and blurted out, "Next Saturday, Miss Brydges, Saturday afternoon, you know, may we do it together then? I can show you much better than I can tell you." And as Lesley smiled assent and thanks, she added, "We can do your other laundry at the same time."

Nothing more was said on the subject, but, when Saturday came, Maggie assumed command of the wash-house, which the two girls had to themselves as it was a lovely May day and everyone had gone out of doors.

She showed Lesley how to use a bleacher, which at once took out the worst of the stain, and then she rolled up her sleeves and said, "And now we will do our laundry."

Lesley was quite unconscious of the deepness of the plot, which the small, silent child had laid so that she could help her without hurting her pride. Maggie guessed that Lesley had gone the wrong way to work from the beginning; she cast about in her mind for some means of telling her how to launder, but she could not find any until she hit upon the brilliant plan of doing her own washing under Lesley's eyes, so as to give her an object-lesson without the humiliation of having her ignorance pointed out by a junior.

Lesley filled a wash-tub with water, put in her clothes, and began to rub away at them as hard as their fine texture, sadly mended and patched, would allow. Maggie soaped hers all over lightly, then left them to soak. She climbed up on to one of the ironing-tables, and dangled her legs while she watched Lesley hard at work. There was not much conversation because Lesley found the work too warm, and her back ached abominably, as it always did when she stood for any time over a wash-tub. Maggie said nothing, but watched, and waited for her cue.

"What a lazy girl!" exclaimed Lesley presently, resting her hands on the side of the tub and straightening her aching back. "You'll never get your washing done to-day!"

"I'm not lazy," answered the child; "I don't wash my clothes hard like that straight off: I just soaps them over and leaves them for half an hour. The dirt fair drops out then."

"Does it?" said Lesley. "I'll try." She soaped the rest of her clothes over, and then joined Maggie on the table with a sigh of relief.

Maggie had been thinking hard: she felt that the moment for enlightenment had arrived. "All women washes differently," she began sententiously, "some says one way whitens the linen, and some says another. My mother taught me; she's a good laundry-woman, is mother! How do you wash your clothes, Miss Brydges?"

"I? Oh, I put them in water and wash them hard with soap, you know, then I rinse them once or twice, and put them in blue-water, and iron them before they get dry."

Maggie's eyes opened wider and wider. "Don't you *bile* them?" she demanded.

"I only did that once, when the dye came out of the stockings!"

"Nor soak 'em!" gasped the child, half to herself. "An' irons 'em wet! My! but no wonder they're such a colour!"

Lesley laughed at the horror in her voice. "Don't I do it right?" she asked.

Maggie stared at her solemnly for a minute or two without speaking, then she slid off her perch with shining eyes and a firm-set mouth.

"Watch me!" she said.

* * * * * *

After the first few weeks, when the strangeness of the life had worn off, Lesley found the work, or rather the lack of work, terribly trying: her only duty seemed to consist in putting away any garment which had been left lying about in the show-room, but as there were some half-dozen model-girls with time heavy on their hands and as the eagle eye of Mr. Urfont never permitted a coat or skirt to stay anywhere but in its appointed case, a minute or two sufficed to clear everything away. There was little else to do all through the long business hours, except in the actual shopping rush. The girls were not allowed to sit down in case any customer came in, because "it looked so slack." This meant interminable hours of standing and lounging about with nothing to do except to gossip to each other, or gaze out of the windows, or over the balustrade of the well, which opened down into the lower shop, trying to find some diversion in watching the customers.

The whole life was an ordeal to Lesley: she liked the

girls, both models and saleswomen, in her department, and admired their courage and good spirits and unfailing good-humour, but she found them very dull. Their interests were limited, their conversation vapid and unstimulating, their witticisms, freshly repeated from the lips of Tom and Dick and Harry, estimable young men who were buyers or shopwalkers in the hairdressing or millinery or ironmongery, were stale and lacking in wit. Apart from gossip about their "boys," their clothes, their evenings, their week-ends, there was no talk except when an actress, or a lady of title, or the heroine of a recent *cause célèbre* came into the department. Then there was a flutter of interest in the languid day, and ripples spread in ever-widening circles on the well of truth, as fragments of gossip were dropped into it. Everyone was eager to "model" for these customers, and, later, each word and action was discussed. The show-room is as penetrating in its criticisms as the servants' hall.

The only other interest of the day was betting. Lesley was filled with wonder at the way in which the girls put down their money on the great racing events of the season—even the small assistants put their shillings and sixpences upon their choices

But how the hours dragged! Now that her mind was free, having mastered the details of the ordinary business day, Lesley was conscious of an empty ache in her heart because of Cotty: Cotty would have made the life bearable for her. The knowledge that working hours over—working hours, which made no demand either on her intelligence or her interest—she would cease to be a machine without mind or soul, and become a woman again, a woman whose companionship was prized, whose mere existence was of importance to some other human being, would have filled those empty hours.

And it was Clarence Verity who was most present in her mind, for it seemed to her, now that she had sent him away, that it was he alone of them all who had stood by her in her need. In her thoughts, now that he was no longer with her, she almost believed that she loved

him. And she was so sorry for him! Many a night she lay awake in her bed wondering if it was not just littleness of soul which had prevented her from linking her life to his. Imagination plays strange tricks with our feelings when we are lonely. She remembered how gentle and chivalrous he was with her, and how, from the very beginning, she had felt instinctively that she could trust him. And sometimes she would bury her head in the bed-clothes, and crush her clenched fists against her mouth to stifle the sound of her sobs, lest they should wake the sleeping children, till her throat ached, and she was quite exhausted with her misery.

She even grew to fancy that she had made the great mistake of her life—had been put to the test as a woman and failed. "After all," she cried bitterly to herself, "if this is to be my life, this empty existence of striving to earn enough money to put bread into my mouth, would it not be more worth while to have made Cotty's life happy!"

If Clarence Verity had come to plead his cause again in these days, Lesley would not have said no; but he did not come. Then, one day, a Saturday afternoon in late June, when London was at its gayest, Lesley turned out of Hyde Park into Knightsbridge and saw him sitting in a taxi, in the congested stream of traffic outside the Hyde Park Hotel. At first she thought that her eyes were playing tricks with her, then she went very white. He was staring in front of him, deep in thought, as she knew by the wrinkles across his forehead; the tan on his face and neck made him stand out from the crowd as a man just back from the tropics. He was thinner than when she saw him last.

Lesley's heart bounded within her. Moved by an irresistible desire to hear his voice, she took a step to the edge of the pavement, but at that moment the stream of traffic began to flow slowly by. He had not looked in her direction.

For quite a long time Lesley stood still, thinking. So Clarence was in London! Would he be faithful to his

promise and not try to see her? All the heart in her cried out that he would not. She was possessed of a sudden panic lest he should go to find her at her rooms—he could get her address so easily from the Club, and he knew that she had gone to Staidburn's—and that they should miss each other.

She was quite confident that he would come. And if he did not, there was the telephone: she knew his number. All the way back to the dingy square in which she lived her thoughts revolved round the one central idea that she must see and speak to Clarence.

"Has anybody been to see me?" she asked breathlessly of the little maidservant who opened the door.

"No, Miss," said the girl, "but there's some parcels come for you, miss. I put them in your room."

Lesley hurried upstairs. The house was very still: everyone had taken advantage of the holiday to make the most of the sunshine. When she opened the door, she saw three large tissue-paper cones on her bed; with feverish fingers she unpinned them—roses, long-stemmed and fragrant, lilies, more roses! Fastened to the lilies was a note in Cotty's handwriting: she tore it open.

"Dear Lesley," it ran,

"You see I have kept my promise. I had to come back on business, but I am leaving England again in a day or two: my only consolation is that you will never know how much I have wanted you. I wish I could send you something more lasting than flowers, only I dare not.

"Yours always,
"Cotty."

Lesley sank down on her knees by the bed, and gathered the roses and lilies to her with both arms, burying her face in their cool fragrance.

"Oh, Cotty, Cotty!" she cried, with tears in her eyes, "I am so lonely! Why didn't you come yourself!"

* * * * * *

It was the fact that she was completely cut off from the outer world, deprived of all congenial companionship, depressed by the thought that she had not one real friend outside the shop, to whom she was necessary, which made the chief difference between Lesley's life and the lives of the other shop-girls. They had friends in their own class; they were well-to-do many of them, with an allowance for pocket and dress money from their parents, where they did not live at home, and they had their tennis clubs, and cheap dances, and their Exhibitions and their river parties to fill up their leisure hours, and satisfy the demands of youth and nature.

Lesley had nothing; it was true that the men in Staidburn's made overtures to her, but Lesley could not bring herself to accept intimacy from the shop-men with the same ease as she did from the girls. A woman is cleverer than a man in disguising class: and, but for their inherent dullness, many of the girls who worked in Lesley's department might have passed muster as "ladies": it was not so much a case of class-distinction as a subtle distinction of soul. Their behaviour was always perfect: Lesley became really intimate with them before she penetrated the veneer of social polish, although her sense of humour made her smile to see how carefully they ate their food.

But it was different with the men: their superfluous manners grated on her from the beginning: she was constantly reminded of a scene which had taken place in an antique shop in Rome between her father and an amateur collector. They were looking at a little round table, which the collector wished to buy if Walter Brydges approved of his purchase. "It has a splendid polish, hasn't it?" he asked triumphantly. Walter Brydges shook his head. "Awful," he said. "Those wretched dealers have coated it so thickly with varnish that you can't see the grain of the wood."

There were times when Lesley longed to scrape the varnish off these ape-like people, and see what kind of men

they were ; for what are the value of manners if they only serve to conceal the soul ?

At first seeing the bold glances which some of them cast at her, she feared that she might meet with unpleasantness, and she was almost thankful for the open dislike of Mr. Urfont. But, as time went on, she found that she was left alone by the other shopwalkers and buyers ; no one was sure enough of his position to molest her—it came under the heading of an ungentlemanly act. Once, it is true, she had a rencontre with the intense young shopwalker of her own department, but her frank laughter robbed the situation of any sentiment. She had been groping among the " shoulders " of a case full of coats and skirts to find a certain model, when she felt her hand grasped in someone else's, and held in a fervent grip. At first she thought it was one of the girls, and she returned the hand-clasp, but as her fingers were not released, she emerged from her side of the case and discovered the sheepish Mr. Fry, looking unutterable things at her from the other. Their hands were still clasped behind the coats and skirts. Lesley's clear laugh only added to his embarrassment : he quite forgot that he was still clinging to her hand, until she protested that she must really find the suit for which she was looking.

Sometimes she thought that she would go mad with the inaction. The summer came and went, bringing no change except the almost welcome rush of the July sales ; that over, a state of absolute stagnation followed, the holiday list was sent round and the staff was reduced. But even then the days were empty of occupation, and at noon the heat of the show-room was unbearable : everyone grew pallid and talked of nothing else but their holidays, and the chance of breathing fresh air again by the sea or in the country. Lesley, as she had not been with the firm for a year, was not entitled to the regulation week's or fortnight's holiday, but she was allowed a day for every month that she had worked at Staidburn's and in September this stretched out to five whole days.

She had no money and nowhere to go to. After much

thought she decided that she would take a room at the Club, and spend the days in taking long bus-rides out into the country. She wrote to the Manageress asking her if she could have a room, and received a cheery letter by return of post, bidding her welcome. Being a holiday month it happened that most of the regular members were away, but one evening when she was walking along the Chelsea Embankment she saw a familiar figure, leaning against the parapet watching a string of barges being towed upstream in the after-glow of the sunset. Lesley would have known that profile anywhere; she stopped, and put her hand on the watcher's arm, "Mary!" she exclaimed, "oh, I am glad to have found you!"

Mary Strange started out of her day-dream: for a moment she did not seem to recognize Lesley; then she held out both hands impulsively, crying, "Why! it's Lesley Brydges!"

"Where have you been hiding yourself, Mary?" cried Lesley.

"Hiding myself!" echoed Mary rather sadly. "There's no necessity to hide yourself in London. Circumstances forced me into a lower stratum of society, that's all." And Lesley, having her own loneliness, understood.

"Are you still at the Club?" Mary went on, "and how are Agnes, and all the others?"

"Agnes went away with Dolly Illington months ago."

"Have you seen her since?"

"No; and no one at the Club has heard from her. She wrote to me when she went away but gave no address. Of course I wrote to her at the Maison Tarobert, but I have had no answer."

"So Agnes has gone off, has she?" said Mary musingly. "Poor little Agnes!"

There was a long silence between the girls, each was deep in her own groove of thought. One by one the lamps began to gleam in the growing dusk, making a pale girdle of light round the semi-circle of the Embankment; the water lapped restlessly against the stone wall.

"I wish it had been anybody else but Dolly Illington," said Mary, as though she was thinking aloud, "I never trusted him."

"Nor I," said Lesley, "but he was very fond of her."

"Why didn't he marry her then?" demanded Mary.

"I don't know: there was some—reason, I suppose," said Lesley with a little pause in her sentence, as she wondered with a pang, whether Dolly had as good a reason for making his offer as the faithful Cotty had had.

But Mary laughed rather bitterly. "Yes," she said, "the usual one—the law of getting something for nothing, or, if the occasion arises, letting the other one pay!"

Lesley did not answer; she was wondering what Mary would have thought of Clarence Verity's proposal. As if she had read her thoughts, Mary went on. "And yet, I don't know that Agnes is to be pitied, even though she may have made a mistake. All through the history of humanity women have made such mistakes—God knows, how willingly!—just as they will go on making them, notwithstanding this talk of Higher Education. She has taken her happiness and her future peace of mind on trust, but then, woman's whole life is one continual taking of things on trust. Look how she marries! Do you think that men can ever understand the long, long dreams their girl-wives have dreamt of marriage—purer than sunlight some of them—dreams of sympathy, more given than received—dreams of ambition, not for themselves—dreams of companionship, so seldom realized—dreams of motherhood, and these, thank God! are the only ones which never fall short, although the awakening from them has often more bitter in it than sweet? No, I do not think she is to be pitied: at least she is out of the treadmill: she has bought her freedom, and there is only herself to pay the price. That in itself must be a glory to her, for it is part of the service of love. And she did love Dolly—I do not know what kind of love it was; not the highest perhaps—but it was real of its sort, something solid in this world of shadows, something definite achieved, a prophecy fulfilled. Do you remember those words

in *De Profundis?*—'Every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy; for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image. Every single human being should be the fulfilment of some prophecy: for every human being is the realization of some ideal, either in the mind of God or in the mind of man.' It's too seldom that we make our lives a work of art; we hold the glowing palette in our hand, but we are afraid to transfer the colours to our canvas. That is why so many of us starve in our old age; memories are richer food for old people than the dried crusts of unrealized dreams! Agnes will have memories, I shall have nothing but dreams!"

"Mary!" cried Lesley, putting her hand on the other girl's arm, but she could not say more for her heart ached at the weary lines on Mary's face, and the hopeless tone in her voice.

"Ah, you are young yet, Lesley, and you have not seen, as I have, the youth which slips away from these working women, as they sit and type or sew through the long days, winter and summer alike, to earn just enough bread to fill their mouths. They have no time and no money for pleasure, until the desire for it has left them; all the sparkle of life slips away. To me it is almost better that they should go gay, and snatch at anything which it is possible to reach, than that they should be hungry all their lives: a woman needs something heroic to enable her to face the monotony of work. It would be all right if she were doing it for somebody else—that is the nature of woman: if she had a child to work for, it would be easy for her.

"Then she would be more on an equal footing with man: he keeps on working, with his nose to the grindstone day in, day out, hardly knowing sometimes whether the sun shines or not. But he is given a fair wage, and he has his life outside his work, and by taking thought he can provide an incentive for work. He can marry, he can have his own home, he can have his children: he has only to stretch out his hand to get it, if he cares about it. But we women have nothing: we slave and grind

just for ourselves: that's the insulting, hateful, pitiable thing about work, that it should all be done just to provide a means of putting food into our own mouths.

"We are potential wives and mothers, but by the curse of circumstances we are denied the right of fulfilling our womanhood, and are forced instead to work on starvation wages to earn just enough bread to feed ourselves with—while health lasts! And this in a Christian country, whose religion claims to have raised the status of womanhood, because it embraces the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Christ, and places her at the head of a long list of women saints! She is worshipped as a mother—the tender humanizing influence in the Catholic Church—the one to forgive—and men pray to her just as a child goes to its mother to confess its little sins, confident of forgiveness and having the trouble put right. Yet, simply because a woman wants to use the divine instinct to spend herself on others, she is called immoral.

"No, I don't blame Agnes, nor pity her! If she has made a mistake, it's a splendid, glorious one, and I'm glad that she's had the courage to make it, if she loved Dolly well enough!"

"Oh, Mary!" cried Lesley, thrilled to the heart. "You are your old self, making crooked ways straight for us others!"

Mary shook her head. "I wish that I could make ways straight," she said wistfully, "there are many of them need it: but I am not big enough, nor do I know enough: like so many women I live in a world of dreams: they are all I have. There is no woman born of woman who does not worship at some secret shrine, and weep before it, and pray upon its steps. Even in early girlhood she lights the lamp of hope before it, and tends it in the sanctuary of her inmost heart. To some the fulfilment of their dream comes early, and then the lamp of Hope goes out, unnoticed in the brilliance of the fires that Faith and Love kindle upon the altar. Some tend the shrine unceasingly,—watering the flowers upon it,—their own lovely thoughts,—with tears, until they grow so weary, and their

lamp of Hope so dim that it flickers out unnoticed in the gloom. Others again will tend their shrines in all good faith awhile, but being by the gift of God impatient, and hearing some lilting music in the Street of Life, they turn the key upon their little shrines, saying: 'I will come back: that music is very sweet and it is passing, but this is always here.' Of these many never return; it is as well; for when they do come back they find their lamps burnt out, their flowers dead, and their heritage of dreams left upon the cold untended altar-stone, like the ashes of a sacrifice.

"Which is a parable, dear Lesley, about a woman's heart, and being a woman you will understand it."

Lesley nodded her head.

"And you?" asked Mary, "what are you doing?"

"I am one of the model-girls at Staidburn's: just now I am staying at the Club because I have five days holiday, but I live-in at Staidburn's."

"But your research work at the Colonial Office!" exclaimed Mary.

"Oh, my dear, is it as long ago as that since we met?" cried Lesley.

"It's a long time," answered Mary. "Nearly two years, and you were young and happy and very sure of yourself!"

"That was because I didn't understand," said Lesley. "I was on the top of the wave and I looked ahead at the green shores of independence, and I thought to myself what a splendid thing it was to develop my own individuality. But since then I have been in the trough of the waves, with no rudder to guide the helm of my boat, and I seem to have thrown the oars and sails of courage and hope and youth overboard. I know I shall never reach the shore, and my thoughts are occupied with just keeping myself afloat to-day and to-morrow."

"Oh, no," said Mary, "I will never believe that you have lost your courage. You don't come of the stock which loses its courage in hardships. I can see that you have suffered—it is in your eyes, I think; there was merely youth in your face before—now there is soul. It is only

the material loneliness which has frightened you: I have felt it too. But you can overcome this when you bring yourself to remember that, from the moment of birth, no matter how loving our parents or how numerous our friends, our soul—the part of us which is and thinks and feels—is afloat in utter loneliness on the sea of Life and Death, as a ship knowing no harbour!"

And then the two girls by mutual consent walked along the Embankment in the dusk, with their faces towards the west, where the last flaming pennons of the procession of the sun were being furled above the horizon.

CHAPTER XIV

WEEDS THAT ENCUMBER THE EARTH

"GOOD Lord, Miss Brydges! How you scared me! I thought you were a customer, and I couldn't think what she was doing round this side of the cases!" exclaimed one of the model girls, a few mornings after Lesley's return to the shop. She had been modelling in, and was still wearing, a particularly becoming blue suit. "Really, you know, in that coat and skirt, you look quite like a lady!"

"Do I?" laughed Lesley, and added with delicate irony, "You see what a difference clothes make!"

"Oh, they do!" agreed the other model girl in all seriousness.

Lesley was in high spirits: the upshot of her meeting with Mary on the Embankment had been that she decided to ask the manager of Staidburn's if she could not have a different arrangement of salary, so as to live out with Mary in her cheap rooms in Chelsea. That morning the manager had sent for her, and said that he was willing to pay her twenty-one shillings a week and continue giving her lunch and tea at the shop, if she prefered to live out rather than live free of board, etc., and receive thirty pounds a year. "You will find yourself better off with your thirty pounds and no expenses," he said kindly. But Lesley did not care: the thought of having congenial companionship was more to her than security, and she arranged to join Mary at the end of the month.

This was the beginning of a happier time for her: the rooms in which she and Mary lived in Chelsea were very small and ugly, and the girls were so poor that Lesley had to start off for work a good half-hour earlier than she used to, because she could not afford the penny for the bus. And when she reached home again at night she had to help to prepare their light meal, and wash it up, in the little sink in a cupboard which the landlady described as the kitchen of their "self-contained flat."

At that time Mary was earning a precarious living by sewing, generally at home, but sometimes, when she was lucky enough to hear of it, in other people's houses, at the rate of three shillings a day and her food. It was always a relief to Lesley when this happened, because she knew how little food Mary was able to buy out of her earnings, and she suspected, with truth, that a crust of bread and butter often formed her staple diet during the day when she was working at home.

With economy the two girls could just manage to live on their wages, but there was never a penny to spare at the end of the week, when they made up their accounts. Mary would sometimes have three shillings in her purse to last her through the week, and Lesley as much as four or five. But even when you live on sardines and eggs and bread and dripping, anything, in fact, which saves cooking—because of the gas bills—five shillings melt alarmingly fast in providing breakfast and supper for the whole week, and lunch as well on Sundays. As the days drew in, and light and firing became a necessity, the pinch was still greater.

Yet in spite of the hardships Lesley was happier than she had been since she said good-bye to Cotty Verity. It was such a relief to emerge from the stagnation of the day at Staidburn's—the weary hours of nothing to do or think about but clothes and gossip—and come back to the tiny room in Chelsea where Mary waited supper for her, with a patched cloth over one end of the table, and her sewing-machine and dressmaking paraphernalia piled up at the other. For Mary had one of

those rare natures which have the gift of creating a home wherever they are. No matter how tiresome the day, how weary the work, she always lifted her head to greet Lesley with the same smile of welcome, laying down her needle for a minute or so to hear how she had fared at the shop, to sympathize and condole when Mr. Urfont had been more trying than usual, to laugh like a child at Lesley's witty sketches of the customers and their idiosyncrasies; or, when the day had been a hard one, to exclaim at the tiredness she must feel, and to insist upon Lesley resting while she prepared the supper. It was seldom indeed that her sunny nature showed itself clouded. Yet her life, for the last ten years at any rate—she was in the thirties now—had been one continual drudgery, one continual struggle with poverty, one continual disappointment.

Even before she reached her twenties, an early age to mature in this cold climate, Mary Strange was the mother-woman: her tenderness for little children, and for weakness and suffering of every sort, her instinct to serve where she loved, the gift of healing which she seemed to carry in her hands, as others carry the gift of translating sound and sight into beauty on instrument or canvas, all marked her as the Mother-type, the Giver, the Healer. Fate and circumstances had combined to starve her nature of everything that it cried out for: from her earliest girlhood she had not demanded from Life either Riches or Fame, she had not even demanded great Love, though, like most girls, she had dreamed of it: all she had asked of life was the service for which nature had fitted her, wifehood and motherhood. Fate had denied her the bread she craved for, and given her stones—the stones of labour for hardly-won independence, and the stones of bought service, which are all that so many women have to sustain themselves with, when they are swept into the maelstrom of work.

Mary still counted her years in the hospital, years of physical weariness and pain, as well as great mental effort, among the happiest times of her life. No

girl, who is gently-bred and ignorant of the deep issues of life, can take her place in the accident ward of a London hospital without having the gossamer of innocence rubbed off her mind. Yet much that was not only terrible but repulsive to the other probationers of her year, passed Mary by. Even death, which she saw there for the first time, only moved her to pity. "How can you seem so calm?" she was asked one day by a probationer, who was flustered and upset in her work, and had called Mary to help her. Mary gave her gentle smile, and looked into the distance with her pure, wise eyes, distended with inward feeling "I *am* calm," she said. "When I see their poor white faces, and the fear in their eyes, and the sweat of weakness on their foreheads, I forget whether they are men or women. I only think of what I can do to ease them, how I can move them without hurting them, in which way I can best give them their courage again. And, when I have made them comfortable, I feel so happy, that I thank God in my heart for granting me the kind of hands which can touch sick people without giving them pain."

She was worshipped by the patients wherever she went, for she had the gift of healing, as well as the gift of pity and understanding. Nothing but her own ill-health would have made her give up the work, hard as it was; but, towards the end of her third year, she was forced to obey the doctor's orders, and leave the hospital. Then followed weary months of work in other people's homes, taking care of other people's children. This almost broke her spirit, but women who have not good health, and have no business capacity or training, do not find many openings where they can earn a living. Courage was one of the salient characteristics of Mary's nature—it is the womanly woman who has always the finest courage—and she came to London to try for work.

What greater tragedy is there than the waste of all that is best in us? From every point of view she was a failure, because her whole life was against the law of nature. She did not want Fame or Success, she wanted to serve, to be necessary, to give. What chance

has a woman like that in business? The more of a woman she is, the more of a failure she becomes. So with Mary Strange; she was always underpaid, because shrewd business people, recognizing her type, took advantage of its weakness; they played on her generosity, on her pity, on her readiness to serve. Yet, though a certain bitterness crept into her words as the years went by, bringing with them no fruit, nor any hope, nothing could mar the sweet wholesome heart of her. Her hair was noticeably white now on the temples; she stooped more than she did when Lesley first met her two years before, and her cheeks were thin. She had been denied the full gifts of love, but, wherever she went, she scattered the lesser gifts of sympathy and friendship, and in every place—in restaurants where she was waiting, in workrooms, in the humbler houses where she sewed, she was adored by children and old people and the very poor. For the old have wisdom and they understand, and children are still of the Kingdom of Heaven, while the poor, as in Christ's day, when His following was mostly of peasants and fishermen, "have ears to hear," and are not ashamed to listen.

There are many women in the great army of half a million who earn their living in London to-day, starving their hearts and wasting the best part of their natures, like Mary Strange. They are the women who should go to the Colonies; they are the women who would not be afraid of solitude, who are fitted and worthy to help their countrymen to uphold the corner-posts of the Dominion, and build up an Empire. Here they are the superfluous women: their very qualities make for their undoing: out there they would be queens in their own right

One night Lesley brought in a halfpenny paper to show Mary a letter written by a woman about the suffrage; it ran:

"This militancy is nothing but a cry from the dim desert of sex-hunger, which sweeps up to the gates of our trim social garden."

"What do you think of this, Mary?" she asked indignantly; and Mary replied:

"It does not signify whether the definition is just or other-

wise. But what is there to scoff at in the fact that men and women are dependent upon each other? Why be afraid of it, why shirk it?

"No one who has seen the tragedy of the superfluous woman can scoff at it! She has so much to give, and there is no one to take. Year by year, just as the cruel and inevitable decay of age creeps over her, does her nature shrink and lessen, sometimes her very sweetness turns to gall."

"I don't wonder that they have bitter tongues and harsh lips, some of these lonely, unloved women!" said Lesley.

"Ah, but it is one of the best things in life to see how many of them keep their sweetness and their fine courage right to the end: I have met them, and I know! Truly the gods love some of the elderly women, who tramp through our streets on charitable errands by day, and go back to their dull rooms in clubs or lodging-houses at night. They have an indomitable youth. Do they ever grumble? Do they ever repine? Have you ever been to them in want of sympathy and been turned away? They know, none better, how little they will be missed when they die, how soon their place will be taken by the others who press on behind. They are living on a pittance many of them; they have no blood-ties; comparatively few of them have realized their womanhood. Yet they have the divinest courage; having empty hands themselves, they can smile at the women whose arms are full of children; not being loved themselves, they lavish love on all who ask for it; having drunk of the Water of Affliction and eaten in solitude of the Bread of Adversity, they seek to lighten the burden of their fellow-creatures, giving forth sweetness out of the strength of their womanhood to the end!"

Lesley fell into the way of lying on the uncomfortable little sofa in their one sitting-room, when the supper was over and cleared away, watching Mary at her everlasting sewing, and talking to her. Her own impatient blood rebelled so often that she wondered at Mary's calm.

"Do you never want help from friends, Mary?" she asked one evening, when she had been unburdening her-

self of her troubles. "Doesn't your soul ever ask you questions when your body is tired? Or are you always the great Giver?" And Mary had smiled her quiet smile and evaded the question.

But sometimes a wave of bitterness would ruffle the surface of her tranquillity, as it did once when the girls had been living together for about two months. It was November and a dreary yellow fog had hung in the streets all day. For over a week Mary had been sewing in her room, sewing, sewing, sewing, against time as usual, for one of her clients who was leaving in a few days for Egypt. From the hour that Lesley went out of the house, at a few minutes past eight, till she came in again between seven and half-past, there was no one for Mary to speak to. The days were cold and damp, but she could not afford to turn up the gas-fire to its full strength, so she kept it going at a pale blue flame which was barely enough to warm her, though she dragged the table as close to the stove as she could.

When the fog came it was worse, because she was forced to work by gaslight all through the day—an added expense. That afternoon she had gone out into the choking fog to take some of the finished garments to her client's house, and to have another fitting. The woman had meant to be kind. "What a shame that you should have to come out on such a wretched day!" she exclaimed as she got up from her comfortable chair by a fire: and she pressed Mary to take a cup of tea. But she had no imagination; the life of this woman, some years younger than herself, who earned her bread by sewing, was a blank to her. All the time that Mary was fitting her, she babbled on about her coming trip, about her pleasures, about her clothes: she drew word-pictures about Egypt, about the goldness of the sand at Assuan, about the wonder of the Nile, linking the tropics to the Mediterranean, about the glory of the sun. "Oh, it will be good to see the sun again!" she exclaimed. And Mary had quietly agreed.

But that night she unburdened her soul to Lesley.

"Oh, my God, this work, this everlasting work, day in and day out, nothing but work, work, work! I think I shall go mad with it! I almost hated that woman this afternoon with her prattle of Egypt, and the sun she was going to bask in. What does she know of the craving for sunshine, which embitters the lives of the poor toilers who sew their health and happiness and hope into the dainty clothes in which she frivols, who never see the sun, or feel the warmth of its caress for six days out of the seven, except for a few brief weeks in summer—she, who is free to stay in the sun, whenever it shines, all the year round! She reminded me of a little conversation I overheard one day in a dressmaker's workrooms. It was spring time, one of those days which make you forget the winter; when the sunshine is as precious as jewels: at the table where I worked was a small apprentice, woefully undersized for her age. When the sun poured in through the uncurtained windows, making a pool of light on the floor, she laid down her work for a minute, and stared at the motes of dust floating up and down in the sunlit air. Suddenly she leaned sideways in her chair, and stretched out her little thin hand, so that it might touch the flood of light: then she sighed and took up her work again. 'My word, but I should like to be out in that sun,' she said wistfully. The bodice hand, sitting at the head of the table, little more than a child herself, looked up from her sewing. 'Nay, girl,' she said gently, 'what are you thinking of?'

"That was all. But oh, Lesley, my throat ached with pity for them: one was so young to have to learn such patience and resignation, and the other—I have seen enough illness to know that only the sun and fresh air can prolong her life; she is already in the grip of consumption. Yet all she said was, 'What are you *thinking* of?'—so remote was the possibility.

"Yes, I could have hated that woman this afternoon, if I hadn't despised her for her lack of understanding. There was a day when I wanted all those things which she possesses, the money, the pretty clothes, the good

time—when I should have envied her, probably hated her. But not now. At every age we need such different things: at twenty we want lights and gaiety, pretty dresses, admiration, amusement; our idea of love is not complete without passion. Later on we do not care so much for these things, we want a home, children, some man to whom we shall be necessary, whose work we may share, for whom we may be ambitious. After that—well, perhaps we get wisdom, we learn patience, and we turn our energies to business, religion, or some hobby or other.

"I don't want the silk stockings of life now! So I did not hate her or envy her, although she has everything, and I have nothing in my life, nothing! nothing! except what I have garnered through my imagination. All through the winter, and all through the summer I have worked: I have learnt to crush down the craving to go out into the sunlight: I have schooled myself to sit patiently in stuffy rooms, while the precious sun mounted the sky and dipped down into the west, and darkness came before I could go out into the air: I have taught myself to look without envy into the passing carriages and motors, as the street lamps gleamed on their occupants, clad in velvets and silks, bound for some gay pleasure place, while I trudged by, unloved and lonely, to my solitary candle and my cheerless meal. And, now that my youth is gone, that I know myself a woman destined to live alone, with not one day-dream realized, I have found out of all my lessons a treasure, and I am beginning to get comfort from it, for I have been reading in the book of Life, and I know how to discover the souls of the people as they pass by. That's why I am so miserable when I am forced to work indoors, as I am now, cut off from my fellow human-beings. I was happier when I trudged backwards and forwards every day, wet or fine, to some workroom or restaurant. I was too tired at nights to read, it was enough for me to tumble into bed after I had cleared away the remnants of my supper, and mended or washed such clothes as I possessed. My book was made up of the faces of the people in the streets, in the omnibuses, in the little

shops where I bought my necessaries; here was a volume whose pages I was never tired of reading: here I could find food for laughter and for tears.

"What do the rich know of these things? I met a woman once, a rich woman with a beautiful home and lovely children, who said to me, 'I don't believe that work is impossible to find. I'm sure I could earn a living, if it was only selling matches in the street!'

"I daresay she could. It is my experience that you can get work of a sort if you are willing to take anything at any wage. But had she ever looked at the faces of the sellers of matches? Had she pondered what the hearts of those women were like, had she seen behind those dirty rags, those thin, wasted cheeks, the blue lips chilled by exposure and lack of proper nourishment, into the souls of the women on the kerbstone? I do not think so."

"You are a Socialist at heart, Mary," said Lesley, after a pause.

"All people who think and feel are Socialists at heart: they can't help it, because they consider the souls of the people, not only their material needs."

"Sometimes it seems to me," said Lesley, "that when Christ said that not one sparrow falls to the ground without the knowledge of our Father, He was thinking of a life which was much simpler than ours, because it was less civilized. When I remember the lives of many of the people here, in London alone, which He seems to have forgotten, I can't help feeling as incredulous as the child, who when she was told by her mother that God could do anything, demanded if He could make a piece of paper with only one side."

Mary laughed, but she shook her head.

"Joking apart, Mary, life must have been simpler when cities were not so big."

"Yes, now we are all so busy with our muck-rakes, that we never have any time to look up at the stars. A squirrel cage is big enough for the ambitions of half of us."

"And yet most of those who go down to the treadmill each morning are happy."

"More's the pity! They are content with their ant lives by day and their picture palaces by night. They, if you like, have no time to look at the stars! It's this damned civilization! If they would only look up and not be afraid, there are the great open spaces, and the fields, and the earth and sky, and all the splendid primitive things which would change them from puppets and dolls into living men and women!"

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Then, one day early in December, the blow fell upon Lesley. She had grown so used to Mr. Urfont's persistent ill-temper and his open dislike that she no longer let herself be made unhappy by him, even when, as often happened, he insulted her before customers for whom she was actually "modelling." But early in December, one of the slackest, and consequently the most trying times in the costume department, because people have bought their winter clothes and are busy with Christmas shopping in other departments, Lesley noticed a change in his manner. She remarked on it to the other model girls, and they all agreed that it could bode no good. "I don't trust 'father' when he becomes sanctimonious," said one of them, using the departmental slang for the buyer, "I've seen him look like that before now when he meant to give anyone the 'swop.'"

"Well, if he gives poor old Brydges the 'swop' just now, a few weeks before Christmas, at a time when he knows perfectly well that she can't possibly get into another job till the January sales, it'll be a dirty trick," exclaimed one of Lesley's partisans.

"Oh, 'father's' capable of any meanness," said the first.

"But he's got nothing against me," cried Lesley, her heart gripped with fear. For what should she do if she was turned away from Staidburn's now, when she had not a penny in the world except the twenty-one shillings she earned every week, and nothing left to pawn, not even

her watch? "The saleswomen are quite satisfied with me as a model, in spite of everything he says to the contrary."

"My dear, there's nothing against you," said Miss Devon, who had joined the little group of girls as they stood talking by one of the cases. "I daresay we could all of us mention people who ought to be given the 'swop' before you, if we judged by merit. But that's not the point: for some reason, best known to himself, 'father' has had his knife into you from the beginning."

"But are they sending girls away?" asked Lesley, with cold fear in her heart.

"Yes they are, from several departments; they do when the season is slack, you know, and it's extraordinary how bad business has been this winter in every part of the shop."

Then the talk drifted to other topics and the subject was forgotten for the next few days by everyone except Lesley. Mr. Urfont continued to ignore her presence instead of bullying her, and once or twice she found him looking at her rather curiously, though he turned away directly he caught her eye. But one day, towards the end of the week, as she came down from lunch, she was met by a girl who told her that "father" wanted to speak to her in his office. Lesley guessed from the fact that he had sent for her, instead of speaking to her in the department, that the worst was about to happen, and the pitying glances of the girls told her that they knew what was afoot.

Mr. Urfont was seated at his desk, looking red and uncomfortable. He assumed an ease which he was evidently far from feeling: perhaps his mean little soul was touched by Lesley's white face and frightened eyes: he went to the point at once.

"I am sorry, Miss Brydges, but I am afraid that I must ask you to resign."

"Do you mean that I must go, that you are sending me away?" said Lesley rather dully. Although she had expected the blow to fall every minute in the last few days,

she felt herself stunned now that the dreaded words were spoken.

Mr. Urfont went redder than ever; he wished that she would bluster and storm instead of looking pale.

He put on his most silky manner, and spoke to her in the soothing tones he adopted to important customers. Lesley, knowing quite well that he was merely sending her away to make room for some favourite of his own, or, if it was true that the staff of the department had to be reduced, he had fixed upon her because of his personal dislike, loathed him for his hypocrisy. She resolved not to let him see how hard hit she was: the more sympathetic and apologetic he was, the more coldly she responded.

"It's not that I have any fault to find with you as a model, Miss Brydges, although of course your lack of business experience is a drawback," he said, ignoring the fact that, from the beginning, he had never ceased to sneer at her figure and deportment, for no reason, seeing that Lesley was openly considered by the saleswomen to be one of the best model girls. "Nor has the firm any fault to find with you: you have been regular in attendance and punctual, and as hard-working as anyone expects in a young lady who has had no experience in business methods. But, the fact is, there is not enough work for the models in this department, and as I have come to the conclusion that you are the least use here, I must ask you to resign. I shall be sorry to lose you," he went on hypocritically, unabashed by the cold dislike in Lesley's eyes now that he had got well into his stride, "and I should like to let you know that I think you are a very nice girl with very nice manners. Personally I have nothing against you":—he said this with great emphasis, pausing for his words to have their full weight. Lesley felt as if she would like to strike his smug, mean face. "And I am certain that you will get on very well elsewhere. After all, what is poison to one is often food to another! You have a very fine figure, my girl, although I still think that it is not suitable to our particular coats

and skirts. However, you may be sure that I will help you in any way I can by recommendations, and you must remember that you are not being entered on our books as being sent away, but as resigning of your free will, for private reasons of your own. You will find that this is a consideration when future employers refer to us."

"Thank you," said Lesley coldly, longing to put an end to the interview, and hating the man more for his fulsome hypocrisy than she had ever hated him for his bullying. For he knew, none better, as Lesley was aware, the meanness of the trick he was playing, because there was no possibility of her getting work anywhere during the next three weeks, and a word from the buyer could have kept her in the firm until a few days before the Christmas holidays. Nor were the freely expressed sympathy and condolences of the girls, who were one and all up in arms against Mr. Urfont, easier to bear. It was hard to keep the tears from springing into her eyes all through the next week, when she went every day to work as usual, until her notice expired.

Lesley left Staidburn's on December 15th with one pound in her pocket. A few visits to the shops convinced her that she would get no employment until the January sales, and even then she did not feel very hopeful of being engaged, because no one would be wanting model girls during the sales, and she had had no experience as a saleswoman. Fortunately Mary had more work on hand than she could manage, and Lesley, in between her long tramps in search of employment, and answering such advertisements as appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*, helped her with the sewing, which enabled them at least to pay their rent.

Although in her heart Mary was worried at their position, she showed a confident front to Lesley, but Lesley was desperate at the thought that she might be a drag upon Mary. If only she had some of her jewellery or little valuables left to pawn or sell! But they had all melted away in those months at the beginning of the year when she was out of work, and yet dared not leave

the Club to go into cheaper lodgings, lest Cotty should suspect what low water she was in.

Then one day she remembered that she had left several trunks full of clothes and books at the Buckingham Palace Club, stored in one of the box-rooms where resident members were allowed to leave a certain amount of luggage, when their work took them, for the time being, out of town. With a light heart Lesley set out to dispose of all her superfluous possessions. When Mary protested at her selling her pretty, but rather worn, afternoon and evening dresses, Lesley shrugged her shoulders. "What use are they to me?" she asked bitterly. "I have not had an evening dress on my back for seven or eight months, and, as things look now, I see no chance of ever wearing one again. They will each of them fetch a few shillings at any rate, and money is more precious to me than clothes. Besides, I hate the sight of them: they remind me of the things I have lost."

The books were of no selling value, and Lesley thankfully piled them up on the already over-full shelves in their little sitting-room. But on the trunks and their contents she was able to raise the sum of two pounds ten, which was enough to tide her over the Christmas holidays till January brought hope of work.

It was a very thin Christmas, and it brought no word from Cotty, Cotty whose chocolates and flowers and boxes of gloves had made other Christmases, both at the Club, and when she was staying with the Ords, such gay affairs. Ken Western wrote to her from Italy, and so did Peter Webbe. She found their letters when she went to the Club to sell her belongings.

The manageress was not in, but Luigi handed them to her with his mournful smile, and said, "*Ecco, Signorina, sono da nostra Italia!*"

"Why weren't they sent on to me?" asked Lesley, her heart bounding at the sight of Peter's handwriting: it was so long since they had written to each other.

"No one knew your address, *Signorina*," said the boy

Lesley wrote down the name of her lodgings, and gave

it to him. "Please see that anything else which comes is sent on," she said, with the smile which had always won its way in Italy.

The boy, who adored her because, when she lived at the Club, she had so often talked to him of his home, a little Tuscan city which she knew, pocketed the slip of paper "I will do it myself, *Signorina*," he said proudly. Poor Luigi! A week later he lay in the accident ward of St. George's Hospital with the life crushed out of him by a motor omnibus, and Lesley's address was stored away by his broken-hearted mother in the little cardboard box which held all his mementoes.

Ken wrote a long rambling letter bubbling over with happiness and quaint philosophy, telling her of the pictures he had been painting, and of his life in the queer little Albergo del Gambero, where he had taken up his winter quarters, demanding too, a letter from her.

Peter's was a formal note of good wishes, which ended with the words, "It is a long time since I heard from you, but in your last letter which I have before me, you sound very confident and gay, so by this time I expect you are well on the high road to success, and have not written, merely because your new world is so full of pleasures, that you no longer have any need for your Cicerone to the Ancient world, where the Gods are still on earth, and Pan still calls to Syrinx in the reeds."

Lesley read both her letters with shining eyes, but it was Peter's that she laid to her lips, with a little deprecating laugh, when Mary went out of the room to fetch the kettle. She did not answer either of them. She would not own to defeat, and she had not enough spirit in those days to make a pretence of happiness. Besides there were the stamps to consider: they represented five hours of comfort if they were dropped into the penny-in-the-slot meter which fed their little gas-stove.

Christmas Day fell on a Wednesday that year, and on the following Friday, Lesley went out directly after breakfast to look through the advertisements of the morning papers in the Free Library. She had not much

hope of finding work, for who would advertise so soon after the holidays? As she tramped along the wet pavement—it was raining miserably, and very cold—she seemed to touch the lowest depths of her depression. Her boots let in the water, and when she reached the reading-room, she found it crowded, and the atmosphere steamy and unpleasant with the smell of damp clothes. Lesley waited her turn for the *Daily Telegraph*, feeling utterly hopeless: her letters from Italy brought back her old longing for the land which had been her home. She pictured the crisp sunshine which would be gilding the domes and towers of Rome to-day, and the golden fruit on the orange trees on the slopes of the Pincian: in imagination she heard the bells of the Roman churches, and smelt the sweetness of the incense, as it was wafted out into the streets, when the worshippers passed in and out of the great doors, lifting the heavy leather curtains which hung across them. She felt an irresistible longing to smell that fragrance, and when she had made out a perfunctory list of shops from the columns of the *Telegraph*, she bent her steps towards the Roman Cathedral in Westminster.

It was quite empty, and very dark on this sunless day, except for the oil lamps before the altars, and the points of light where candles burned in the gloom at the feet of saints. The silence and the vastness, the subdued richness of mosaics in the vaulted chapels, the vast columns of rare marble, the mist which seemed to veil the great crucifix suspended before the High Altar, combined to bring her peace.

"It is like home," said Lesley softly to herself, as she stood inside the door, letting the warmth and fragrance permeate her being, while a rush of memories and associations turned her thoughts to Italy. She did not pray, but as she was wont, wandered about the great church in a rapt silence, her mind given over to impressions. Then all of a sudden she came upon a little statue of St. Anthony, in a dark alcove. On the rough iron framework at his feet, with spikes for candles, were

tapers, some almost burnt away, and others varying in length from one to three or four inches. Beside them were withered flowers, just such withered flowers as you can see on any wayside shrine in Italy, where the saints, like the gods of old, are the recipients of many humble gifts.

Somehow the sight brought tears to Lesley's eyes and the old *nostalgia* to her heart. She fumbled in her purse for a coin and, dropping it in the box, took out a taper, and lighting it from another flame, fixed it upon a spike below the feet of the saint. She knelt at the prie-dieu and buried her face in her hands. "Help me, St. Anthony, you who restore our lost possessions to us, oh, help me! I have lost my courage, and I do not know where to look, so that I may find it!"

The church was curiously silent, there was no sound except the sputtering of candle-wicks as the little flames flickered and wavered in the gloom. Presently the clocks of Westminster began to sound the hour: it was noon. Lesley raised her head; the taper she had lit was burning steadily; its flame, higher than the rest, illuminated the pink and white face of the saint, and picked out his gilt aureole. Lesley smiled indulgently. It was so palpably a doll. "What children we are!" she said to herself, and aloud, "Do you laugh at us, sometimes, dear God?"

"You spoke, my daughter?" said a voice at her side.

Lesley started, a priest was standing by a confessional box close at hand.

"I must have been thinking aloud," said Lesley. "I have been asking St. Anthony to help me."

"You have lost something?" queried the priest, with a twinkle in his kind eyes.

"I thought I had lost my courage."

"And you have found it," said he. "I am glad that you have not lost your faith."

Lesley rose from her knees. "No, father," she said, "I have not lost my faith, but I fear that it is not the same

faith which brings you peace. Life has taught me to believe in other things besides the Father and Son and the Holy Ghost."

"It is no matter," said the priest, preparing to take the place she had vacated at the prie-dieu. He gave her a smile of sympathy. "Do not forget, my daughter," he said, "that in the beginning God made man in His image, and since then, all through the history of the world, man has occupied himself in creating Gods after the likeness of his own mind and heart. It does not matter under what name or in what guise you worship him, for, according to your need and the power of your understanding, so will you fashion your God."

Outside Lesley found that the rain had stopped. She looked at the list of shops who were advertising for sale-hands. The nearest one was Hobury's in Regent Street. She decided to spend a penny on the bus fare. Somehow, whether it was the candle which she had presented to St. Anthony, or the kindly tolerance of the priest, she went forward with more confidence. She decided that St. Anthony must have been pleased with her offering, for the manager of Hobury's engaged her at once as a temporary saleswoman in the "coats and skirts" at the salary of twenty-five shillings a week, and a commission of threepence in the pound.

CHAPTER XV

LESLEY THE SALESWOMAN

"MARY, my luck has turned!" cried Lesley, bursting into the room, with her hands full of jonquils.

"Flowers!" exclaimed Mary with shining eyes, holding out her hands for them. "It *is* long since we had any flowers!" She buried her nose in the fragrant blossoms, and only lifted it out for a second to demand, "What has happened, Lesley?"

Lesley peeled off her gloves, and knelt down by the gas-stove: she turned it on full, and spread out her hands to the cheerful glow.

"I've been casting my bread upon the waters, and lo! it returned to me within the hour."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to begin with I bought a penny candle and, with due ceremony, presented it to the good St. Anthony, whose name be ever blessed! because I felt that I had lost my courage, and I thought that he might help me to find it. I don't care if you do laugh, Mary—St. Anthony and I have been good friends ever since I can remember. Well, perhaps he was a little deaf—who knows?—or perhaps he thought I was in need of luck rather than courage, anyway, the very first shop, to which I went after leaving him, engaged me, and I am to go to work to-morrow!"

"To-morrow! Oh, Lesley, I am glad! What are they giving you?"

"Twenty-five shillings a week, and a commission of threepence in the pound!"

"Why, that's more than they gave you at Staidburn's, even without the commission."

"I know," said Lesley. "Hence the jonquils. And, for to-day, we will burn as much gas as ever we like!"

This was the beginning of a better time for Lesley: the managers of Hobury's liked to have ladies in their shop, and they were pleased with the way in which she tackled the difficult business of a sale in a strange showroom where she was ignorant of the stock. During the last week in January, when Lesley was beginning to look round anxiously again for work, she was sent for by the general manager, who asked her if she would care to take a permanent post in the department as junior saleswoman.

"Of course, if you would rather, I daresay we can find a place for you among the model-girls for the 'costumes.' It was as a model, I believe, that you worked at Staidburn's?"

"But I would much rather be a saleswoman," said Lesley, eagerly.

The manager smiled. "Commission, eh?" he said kindly.

"Yes," answered Lesley, "besides the work is so much more interesting, and you do feel that eventually, if you work hard, there is some chance of independence."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said the manager; "that's the right business spirit. It's hard work, and you don't get to the top of the tree at once, but I can assure you, my dear Miss Brydges, that the woman who likes to take an interest in her work, and who is intelligent enough to learn how to handle customers successfully, has not only independence in front of her, but real prosperity. There are not many professions for women of which you can say as much: and there's always the hope to hold before your eyes for encouragement, when

you are still only a junior, and commissions come in slowly, that one day you may be the buyer for a department, or even for a business."

It was the fact that she had hope before her and the knowledge that sooner or later, when she had served a certain term as junior, she would get promotion, and with promotion a larger salary and the inevitably larger profit on commission, which made Lesley contented with her life at Hobury's. Though the work was harder than it had been at Staidburn's, she did not suffer from the *ennui* of having to spend long hours of inactivity.

Being a junior, she did not make much money off her commission at first, for it is the rule of the showroom that no junior is put on to a "line" while any of the senior saleswomen are at liberty to take it; but the little that she did make was like the sign of the rainbow to Noah, because it was the token of the covenant that, unless untoward circumstances overtook her, she would never again be submerged under the flood of adversity.

In the spring time, Mary grew impatient of sewing all day long in her little room, and with some of her best clients abroad, she found it hard to earn enough to pay her way, so she went back to her restaurant work. This meant that she never reached their lodgings till nine o'clock at night, and Lesley was forced to have a solitary supper. Mary had hers at the restaurant; so the girls saw very little of each other except on Sundays. Mary was only earning twelve shillings a week, but she had all her meals provided except breakfast, and as she was not wanted at the restaurant until twelve o'clock, she managed to do a little sewing work beforehand.

Another April came with a burst of glad Spring weather, and Lesley, to whom April was the magic time of the year, remembered how it was this month a year ago that Cotty Verity had made his fatal proposition, and had been sent out of her life. She thought of his request that he might be allowed to see her in a year's time, and as the day drew near—how clearly she remembered the date!—she began to expect him. Womanlike she was tempted to buy

a new hat, a very inexpensive one, but daintily trimmed for her by a girl friend in the millinery department. The days went by, April slipped into May, and Lesley, though she was comparatively happy in her work at Hobury's, and no longer had the active need of Cotty Verity to fill her life, felt a little sore that he had not even written. "I suppose he has forgotten all about me," she said.

Soon she was in the midst of the great shopping rush of the season, and Lesley, in spite of her months of standing about at Staidburn's, began to find the constant work and being always on her feet very exhausting. Perhaps the hot weather, which came in early that year, tried her too. She was desperately tired at nights, too tired to eat, and, as Mary was not there to scold her into taking a meal, she often had no supper except a cup of tea and a little bread and butter. She began to look thin and white; her back ached continually, and sometimes the pain in her feet was almost unbearable. The girls in the shop, seeing how ill she looked, advised her to ask for a holiday, but Lesley knew that she could not afford to be out of work for a week, even if she could be spared from the department in the middle of the shopping season. Her spirits flagged, and she looked forward with dread to the month of July sales, which separated her from the summer holidays. Mary was seriously concerned about her, and urged her to see a doctor, but Lesley would not. "I'll take a tonic," she said, "I'm all right really: it's only that my feet hurt."

Mary looked at her keenly, this was the first she had heard of foot trouble.

"What's wrong with them?" she asked sharply.

"They've been painful for a long time," said Lesley, "but they seem to be getting worse. It began at Staidburn's. You know we had so much standing about there; I must have strained the muscles or something."

Mary asked a few questions, then she said, "Take off your shoes; I want to look at your feet."

"They're a horrible sight," laughed Lesley, apologetically, "they seem to be developing an elderly spread."

Mary felt the swollen insteps tenderly. "I thought as much," she said, regarding the poor misshapen feet, which were once so pretty, with a frown of dismay, "it's flatfoot, and you've got it fairly badly. You must have some special shoes made for you at once, and as for standing all day, well, it's simply criminal, unless you mean to ruin the shape of your feet for ever!"

"Mary!" cried Lesley, in horror. "You know I must stand! Whatever am I to do?" She felt so weak and miserable that she burst into tears. "It is rotten luck, just when I was getting on so well!"

Mary comforted her as best she could, but she was secretly distressed at the state of her feet and at her generally run-down condition.

This was early in June. By dint of screwing and saving, Lesley managed to pay for a pair of shoes from a flatfoot specialist, and having confided her trouble to the buyer of her department, an arrangement was made that she should go for a holiday directly the sales were over. She was such a favourite among the saleswomen that no one raised any objection to a junior going away in the most coveted holiday month.

The shoes lessened the pain in her feet, but Lesley found the days very wearisome. It was hot and stuffy in the department, and customers, instead of being more patient with the assistants, seemed to grow more exacting. The morning was always the busiest time, but she was comparatively fresh then and could put up with the vagaries of customers, whom she knew at sight to be not intending purchasers but those vampires of economy, who insist on inspecting almost the whole stock, and then go away without buying anything, even saying sometimes to the hot and weary assistant, "I shall come back in the sales. I only wanted to see what you had in the shop." Besides the weariness of waiting on such people, who think nothing of taking up an hour, sometimes more, of her time, the poor assistant has to see her chance of commission dwindling away into the hands of other saleswomen. And in Lesley's case at any rate, the commission meant so much, because

she had to save every penny she could, to pay for her expenses, when she took her longed-for holiday.

The time she felt most weary was just before tea, when she still had a couple of hours' work before her, and had had no rest or refreshment since two o'clock. To add to her weariness and discomfort on one hot summer afternoon, she had spent the past hour in trying to find something in the stock, which would meet the favour of Lady Eastbourne.

The Earl of Eastbourne was a St. Barbe. If various intervening families died out, he might even become Duke of Broadlands some day, for he was the lineal male descendant of an early Duke. He was likewise a member of the Jockey Club, the Royal Yacht Club, and various exclusive institutions in the neighbourhood of St. James's Street. He had been in the Household Cavalry till his marriage led to a hasty resignation. He was a typical member of the aristocracy, and a very charming person.

But his wife passed most limits. She had been one of the chief stars of the Musical Comedy Theatre, and, while she was there, with her neat figure, pert face and sharp tongue she had been one of the most popular comedians of the day. She fascinated Lord Eastbourne with her wit at suppers to such an extent that he offered to share his ancient name and broad estates with her.

She accepted them and tolerated him. He had to give up his regiment of course, but he never regretted it. He was accustomed to the captiousness and heartlessness of musical comedy actresses, and, as conventions go, she made him a good wife. The foibles of the aristocracy, into which she had married, proved an everlasting supply of petrol to keep her wit in motion. She had no desire to see any of the class, from which she sprang, for she knew that she was one of the ugliest actresses who had ever made a hit, and that there were plenty of pretty ones, who would not object to a private establishment with her husband. She had and desired no flirtations. She lived for the splendour of her surroundings, champagne and,

above all, for the gratification of swaggering as a nobleman's wife.

Her household was well run because she loved giving orders, and was a martinet at seeing them carried out. And she preserved in her new life the genius for getting the last ounce out of shops, which had helped her to keep smart in her low salary days on the stage. Shopping was her chief recreation, since she had become so stout. It was less trouble than anything else to motor from Mayfair Square to one of the big west-end shops and, as she was a Countess and spent large sums, they put up with her annoyingness and exactingness, and the shopwalkers were always ready to scold the assistants on her complaint.

Her stage name had been Dot Vidler, but no one would have recognized the neat, fresh-coloured Dot in the enormous red-faced woman, who presided over rank and fashion at Eastbourne House. Power had given an intensely disagreeable expression to her pug nose and petulant mouth. She waddled round and round the coat and skirt department, with the unfortunate Lesley in attendance, pulling all manner of unsuitable garments out of their cases, and insisting that Lesley should slip them over her trim black silk dress, so that she could "get an idea of their hang."

Dot Vidler, who had been born Robinson and baptized Sally, took up the stage as a profession by the merest luck. She had been brought up in a small sweet-shop, where she had acquired the gift for repartee, which gave her fame before the footlights. The leading low comedian at her theatre had a Great Dane which bounded into her shop one day after the cat that kept the mice down. She flew out into the street to get its master's assistance. The comedian looked in at the door, but at the first glance became incapacitated with laughter. The cat had taken up a coign of vantage on the shelves and knocked down bottles from there. The dog knocked down bottles with its tail, and upset a glass cupboard three feet high, and made more noise than a football match with its barking.

The cat from its safe position said abominably impertinent things.

The comedian was overcome with joy: it was the best unrehearsed turn at which he had ever assisted. With tears in his eyes, he begged, between gasps: "Let 'em finish it —I'll pay!"

The girl told the comedian what she thought of him so emphatically that he insisted on a part being written for her as his wife, in the new Musical Comedy they were rehearsing. A few years afterwards she became the Countess of Eastbourne, and cut him dead in the entrance hall of the "Métropole" at Brighton. To which he retorted by asking the porter, in a loud voice, "Who is that fat woman? I thought I knew her!"

By the time that the ex-sweet-shop Countess had finished with her, Lesley felt like a buttercup which a child had been carrying with its petals clenched in a little hot hand.

As she was beginning to put away all the coats and skirts which the Countess had been pulling out, she was conscious of a gentleman timidly finding his way into the room, with the air of a man who is trying to travel in the lady's compartment of a railway carriage. He was slim and tall and scrupulously dressed; the shininess of the hat and the correctness with which the tie was folded, were worthy of a Tirebuck, but the slight stoop told her who it was before she noticed the gentle philosopher's face and the tired blue eyes, with their network of little wrinkles at the corner.

"Peter!" she cried, and then flushed painfully.

"Lesley!" He took off his hat and held out his hand.

"Oh, Peter, why didn't you let me know that you were coming?" exclaimed Lesley, very white now that the flush had died away.

"But I did! I wrote to you some weeks ago at the Buckingham Palace Club. I thought it strange that I received no answer, so I went there the second day I was in London, and found my letter waiting for you with several others, but they told me that they did not know your address. I asked where you were working and they said

that the last they heard was that you were a model—whatever it may be—at Staidburn's. But lately letters had been returned from there, too."

"How strange!" said Lesley, suddenly conscious that Peter was still holding her hand. She withdrew it, but Peter was too staggered at the idea of meeting Lesley, such a very different Lesley, in a place like Hobury's, to notice that he had been retaining it. He had not put on his hat again, but held it by its brim, resting on his arm. His hair was still inclined to curl crisply round his fine head, though as usual clipped too short to tell tales, but it was growing thin on the top. What did it matter? This was Peter—part of her old life—the only man in the world for her!

"What are you doing in this dreadful place, Lesley?"

Lesley laughed. He was regarding the unfamiliar cases and figure-stands with such an unfriendly eye! "There's nothing dreadful about it, Peter, when you're used to it. I am only earning my living." Then a sudden fear assailed her. What was Peter doing in this department? Could he be married, and waiting for his wife? "What are *you* doing here?" she asked quickly.

"I'm lost," said Peter helplessly. "Let me see, I came in to buy something, it doesn't really signify what, something *leather*, I think, and the shopwalker told me to come through here."

Lesley gave her little gurgle of amusement, which Peter remembered so well. His blue eyes twinkled. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Now that I've found you, I want to talk to you, and I have so little time. I'm going down to Dover by the dining-car train, and I must get back to my hotel, and change into something more suitable for the journey. I have to go to the Doria wedding in Rome the day after to-morrow. That is why you see me in these ridiculous clothes! I came to England on purpose to get them. I so seldom wear such things in Rome that mine were a little bit old-fashioned, like myself."

"The Doria wedding! How strange it is to hear those names again! Who is she marrying, Peter?"

"The Count of the Borromean Islands."

"But what were you going to buy?"

"A present for my housekeeper; she has been with me for so many years. You remember her?"

"Very well."

"I wish you could help me choose something for her."

"I think I can. Wait a moment, while I ask the shopwalker if I may come with you into the leather department."

She left him, and went up to speak to the shopwalker. Peter was inexpressibly shocked that she should have to ask permission from that commonplace young man, just as he was inexpressibly shocked to see how ill and thin she looked. But he said nothing, and they went together into the leather department, where Lesley spoke to a girl, with whom she was evidently on intimate terms, and stood by, while Peter had a selection of "vanity" bags laid out on the counter for his inspection.

At his request Lesley chose a grey suède bag, and, while the assistant was wrapping it up, said: "Is Esme living in Rome, Peter?"

"No, I think she is still in the East. Don't you write to each other?"

Lesley smiled a wry little smile. "No," she said. "I have had no word from her since we parted in Rome."

"Humph!" said Peter. "Well, she left Italy very soon after you did. She shut up the flat; I think she meant to come back and live there, but she took it into her head to go to Japan. And recently I suppose she gave her agents instructions, because the flat and all its contents have been sold to a young Englishman, who is living in it."

"Really? Who is he? An artist, I suppose."

"No! He's not an artist. I forget his name, though I have met him—he's an athletic sort of chap, and plays wonderful golf. I found him one day wandering rather disconsolately on the Palatine, and we got talking; he was interested in my excavations."

When the assistant came back with his change, Peter

said, "I'm afraid I must go now, Lesley, but I intend to come back in a few months to extricate you from this. Please tell me where I can write to you."

"No. 16, Mimosa Road, Chelsea."

"I am still living in the Palazzo Valverde, Rome. You will write to me there, won't you, Lesley."

"I am afraid that I shall have nothing to tell you, Peter. There is not much in my life to interest you."

"Tell me about yourself—that is what I want to know." He paused, his blue eyes regarding her gravely. Then he smiled the sudden, endearing smile which transfigured his whole face. "And take care of yourself, dear Lesley," he said with feeling.

Lesley held out her hand. "Good-bye," she said, "take my heart to Rome, Peter."

Peter held her fingers in his firm, confident clasp. "Not this time," he said. "I shall come back for it. *A rivederci!*"

He put on his hat, giving a little salute with the brim, and passed out into Regent Street. Lesley went back to her department feeling as if darkness had descended upon the earth.

The next day was Saturday, so she took the opportunity of going round to the Buckingham Palace Club in the afternoon to fetch the letters of which Peter had spoken, and to leave her address again. There were two from Peter, which she put into her bag to read at leisure. The other was in Cotty Verity's handwriting, and it bore an Italian postmark. Then it *was* Cotty who had taken her father's flat!—Yes, the paper was stamped Piano IV. 50, Via Gregoriana, Rome—the flat in which she had spent most of her life. But that was not the only shock which awaited her; as she opened the envelope a cheque for one hundred pounds dropped out of it.

The letter ran:

"My dear Lesley,

"I cannot come back to live in London, because I know that the sight of you in poverty, while I had

wealth, would make it impossible for me to rest without begging you to share it. I do not mean that there would be the slightest chance of my making such a cad of myself again, as I did, when you banished me from all that I love in life. But I know that I could not help pressing an income on you, to end the cruel drudgery, to which you have to submit. I hope you won't be offended by my asking you to put the enclosed into the Savings Bank to draw on in case of necessity—if you are out of work, or ill, or anything. You can't mind that!

"The heading on the paper will show you what I have been doing: I found your flat to let furnished with your own furniture in it, which your stepmother had sold to the landlord. He bought it so as to let the place furnished and, as he had never been able to let it, he was glad to sell it to me, flat, furniture and all. I hated the idea of anyone else using your things, while it is a delight to me to picture you sitting in every chair, re-arranging every table, moving about in every part of every room. Your ghost is everywhere, and I sit and watch it with closed eyes. And if ever you want to use the flat, Lesley, I will go away from Rome for as long as you like. And you can have anything you want out of it any time, because all your belongings are mine now.

"I have been backwards and forwards to England eleven times during the past year, but I have kept away from all the places where I might meet you, except once at Christmas time, when the longing to see you was unbearable, and I went to the dormy-house of Staidburn's, where you were living. But you had gone, and no one knew where. Directly I rang the bell I was ashamed of myself, because I had broken my promise; it was really a relief that you were not there, though I had come all the way from Japan to see you, because I should have felt such a cad when you told me that I had broken my promise. So I did not go on to the Club, where I expect I could have got your address.

"At first I didn't do much at Rome except play golf;

the links are much better than you would expect: the greens are really good, though most of them, as of course you know, have hardly a level yard on them, and the hazards are all natural—carrying gullies and rocks, and that sort of thing. But I hired a car here by the month to take me out to the links, because I never remembered the trains, and then I found that there were all sorts of places that I could go to by car, and get a jolly good lunch, and see some Etruscan remains. Don't laugh at me, Lesley, I'm not much good at churches and temples, and that style of thing, unless I have some Johnny with me, who knows all about them. But, when it comes to underground tombs, and walls built of natural stones as big as a coffin, I confess that I'm knocked.

"It worries me that I'm no good at the other things: they sounded so awfully interesting when you were telling me about them. The fact is that Italy is no jolly good without you: I endure it because I'm living here with your ghost, and it's less than two days from Lancashire, so I can run up to the mill when I'm wanted for an important meeting. And I get my golf: I didn't tell you that I am amateur champion of Italy.

"But what's the good of it all? What's the good of anything, when I can't be sure enough of myself to come and live where I can see you?

"COTTY."

"Dear Cotty," said Lesley, "I wish he could be sure of himself."

She wrote him a long friendly letter, returning the cheque, but with such gracious thanks that more than half the sting was robbed from its refusal. She drew a bright picture of her life at Hobury's. "You must not think of me as living in poverty. Within a year or two, I shall be earning a comfortable salary, and with any luck I shall be able to put by enough to provide for independence in my old age." And she ended with the words: "It was dear of you to buy the flat and its contents: I would rather they were yours than anyone else's: please

write to me sometimes, and try to think of me only as I think of you—a very dear friend. Lesley."

She was astonished to find how detached she felt about Cotty, now that the long silence was over. Was it the coming of Peter? Could those few words with him, those handclasps at meeting and parting have altered the perspective of her whole life? Something told her that they had.

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But the Gods do not like self-confidence: or perhaps Saint Anthony, having restored her friends to Lesley, bethought him of taking back his gift of luck. One day towards the middle of the July sales she had a bad fainting-fit, followed by another; she was in a state of utter collapse; the heat and the great rush of work, combined with the pain in her feet, were too much for her. She was warned by the doctor who was hurriedly summoned, that if she continued her work at Hobury's, it was at her own risk; a year at the least must elapse before she could undertake it again.

Lesley stayed away from business for a week, then she was sent for by the management, who put the proposal before her that they would be willing for her to return to them in twelve months' time, and take the same place in the department as she occupied now, but that they felt, on receipt of the doctor's diagnosis, that it was better for her to resign temporarily. Everyone was very kind: she received her week's salary and the commission which she had earned in the sales, before her collapse; and her friends in the various departments made a voluntary subscription towards her holiday expenses.

Lesley went to Shanklin, to a nursing home kept by a friend of Mary's, where she stayed for a month, recruiting, and Mary, who found the rooms in Mimosa Road a tax on her slender income, returned to her cubicle in a working girls' club, not far from her restaurant. Thus Lesley saw the green shores of Independence recede once more into the mists of Uncertainty.

CHAPTER XVI

LIFE AS A NURSERY GOVERNESS

WHILE Lesley was staying at Shanklin she studied the columns of the *Telegraph* and *Standard* and *Morning Post* to find some means of earning a living, when she should return to London at the end of August. But, after she had ruled out the shop assistant, trained typist, and secretary advertisements, she found there was very little left. Mary's friend, the head of the convalescent home, advised her not to try for work in London at all, but to take a post as nursery governess in the country or, if possible, by the seaside. "The life will be dull," she urged, "but at least you will have good food and comfortable surroundings, and you will not have to be on your feet any more than is necessary for your own health. If you can get the sort of post I mean, you will find that, except when you are taking your little charges out for their daily walk, or are actually engaged in putting them to bed at night and helping hem to dress in the morning, you can spend the rest of your time sitting in your schoolroom or nursery, either teaching them, or sewing, while they play."

The prospect was a grey one, but Lesley realized its value. And here in Shanklin in the long idle days which she spent lying on the yellow sand below the cliffs, she thought with dread of the coming winter and all the privations of cheap lodgings. At least she would have

warm rooms to live in, and the luxury of a bath. As there were no advertisements of the sort in the *Telegraph*, she bought a copy of the *Church Family Newspaper* and answered a whole sheaf of applications for nursery governesses. She spent half-a-crown in stamps, and during the next few days watched anxiously for the postman, because she could ill afford this capital outlay.

Only six letters came; three of them wanted a University degree, for twenty-five pounds a year or less; the fourth offered no salary, but a good home in a Christian household—Lesley shuddered at the prospect. The fifth was from a widowed clergyman with six children, who required an educated lady of sound Anglican principles to look after his house and family, to teach the four elder children and to be nurse to the two younger ones, for the sum of thirty pounds a year. She was offered a good home, and she was expected to take her place in the parish, as assistant to the vicar. It was a nice letter, and Lesley laid it down with regret. "But it won't do," she said firmly, "I don't mind being a nurse and a governess and a housekeeper, but I won't be a curate."

The sixth was from a Mrs. Skinner who lived in Palace Gardens North, Kensington Park. She wrote a friendly letter on nice paper, saying that she was in need of a lady of good birth and education to take entire charge of her two little boys, aged six and seven respectively. The salary she offered was twenty-four pounds a year. She asked for two references and said that she was "in urgent need to be settled," so that she hoped Miss Brydges would reply by return of post.

"What am I to do for references?" said Lesley to the good-hearted Irish lady who looked after the convalescent home. "I'm afraid that a letter from the shops would not be of any use, and I am sure that, even if I wrote and asked Mrs. Ord for one, she would not give me a recommendation!"

"I'll get the vicar here to vouch for your respectability: he is an old friend of mine, and he was telling me only the other day that he knew your father by sight at Oxford.

In the meantime, write to the manageress of your Club, or better still—it will save time—use the references which I suppose you had to show her, before you could be elected as a resident member. They still have the rule about two references, haven't they ? "

" Yes," said Lesley, "and I happen to have them with me. But Lady Rusbridge is dead. Do you think that will matter ? "

" Not a bit, and, if I know anything of the sort of women who live in Palace Gardens North, the fact that you have a letter of reference from a lady of title will clinch the matter. Can't you hear her saying to all her friends over the tea-table, ' My new governess was recommended to me by Lady Rusbridge ' ? "

" Good heavens," ejaculated Lesley, in laughing dismay, " let's hope she won't be as bad as that ! "

Whether the letter from the defunct Lady Rusbridge turned the scales in her favour or not, did not transpire, but, by return of post, came a letter from Mrs. Skinner expressing satisfaction with the references, and asking her to take up her duties as early in September as was convenient to her.

Lesley arrived at Palace Gardens North in time for a late tea. Mrs. Skinner, a stout, red-faced woman dressed in a severe alpaca dress, with linen collar and cuffs, like the matron or housekeeper of a school, sat on a straight-backed chair and talked to her perfunctorily. The two little boys, whom Lesley registered in her mind as the ugliest and most disagreeable children she had ever met, left their toys and stood beside their mother staring at her.

Lesley was hungry ; she had had a long railway journey and an early lunch ; she ate several slices of thin bread and butter, and then helped herself to a small rock cake from a piled-up dish.

The elder boy nudged his mother. " She's going to eat a cake," he said in a stage whisper, " can I have a piece, Ma ? "

He was refused, but Lesley felt embarrassed : it was obviously not the custom to help yourself to cake un

invited; she did not spend many hours in the Skinners' house before she realized that however plentiful the food on the table might be, she, the governess, the paid dependant, was not expected to help herself to it.

When she had finished, Mrs. Skinner asked her to ring the bell. Lesley did so, and a slatternly maid-servant came in. "Take Miss Brydges up to her room and then clear away the tea-things," said the mistress of the house. She turned to Lesley. "When you have taken off your coat and hat, please come down again and help me to put the boys to bed."

Mrs. Skinner did everything by rote. She was the wife of a pawnbroker, whose income would not have been strained if he had paid good wages to three servants as well as a nurse or governess. This is what he would have prefered to do had he been allowed, but his easy-going nature was no match for the masterful Mrs. Skinner. Mrs. Skinner had a passion for domesticity; if it had been possible she would have done the entire work of the house herself: she had done it for the first few years of her married life, much to the patient Mr. Skinner's secret dismay. Not that she was slovenly or an inefficient cook; she excelled in every branch of housewifery. But she allowed herself to become so absorbed in her house that she had no time or desire for social amenities, and jolly Mr. Skinner was forced to fall back on his Club, and other bachelor institutions, for amusement and interest. The pretty frocks with which her trousseau had been furnished were allowed to grow old-fashioned in her wardrobe; in the morning she put on a plain print dress, which was covered by a capacious apron, the moment her husband went out of the house, and this she wore until late in the afternoon, when she changed into one of her severe alpaca garments.

In the early days Amos Skinner, to whom the word "home" meant more than a glorified boarding-house, protested. He begged her to wear her pretty dresses, to go out to parties and the theatre, to entertain, and to let him bring back his friends in the evenings, "To make 'em

jealous, don't you know, when they see how jolly comfortable we are!" But Mrs. Skinner could not be persuaded to join him in the paths of pleasure. "I've no time to waste on such things," she had said.

"But you would have, if you let me engage some servants to do the work," protested Amos.

"Servants!" snorted his wife. "If you want a thing done well, you've got to do it yourself!"

"But I hate to see you going about in a print dress doing servants' work, just as though we couldn't afford 'em," he pleaded, desperately: he had a wholesome and natural ambition to climb the social ladder at the same pace as his friends in the City and at the Club. But Mrs. Skinner, who had no feminine weaknesses, compressed her thin lips, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Some people never know when they are well off!" was her comment.

Later, when the second boy was born, she consented to have a resident servant. And, at the time when Lesley came to join the Skinner *ménage*, there was a little maid-of-all-work in the kitchen, as well as the untidy general, who answered the door, and was deputed by Mrs. Skinner to show her to her room.

Lesley found that she was not to be allowed the luxury of a bedroom to herself: the small attic to which she was conducted by the maidservant, had another bed in it. "That there's for Master George," commented the girl. "It's lucky for you it's not Master John—'e's a 'oly terror."

"Is Master George the elder one?" asked Lesley.

The girl nodded. "'E's not a bad kid," she said, gaping at Lesley's hat, which she had laid down on the dressing-table. She was wondering whether she couldn't get ribbon like that from the little shop in the Edgware Road, where she bought her odds and ends of finery. "I'll try it on when she's gone downstairs," was her secret comment.

The next hour was spent in putting the boys to bed; Mrs. Skinner had very pronounced views as to how everything concerning her house, and the care of her children

should be done; she had theories as to how they should be washed, and how they should be dried. And, when they were safely tucked up in their beds—George in Lesley's room, and John in a little room adjoining Mrs. Skinner's bedroom—they had to be given a cup of hot milk, and soothed into a semblance of repose.

"Don't I have to hear them say their prayers?" asked Lesley, as the two women went downstairs, after turning out the gas on the landing; she was really rather ignorant about children, but she had vague ideas that they always said their prayers aloud at nights to their mother or their nurse.

"Please don't talk any nonsense about prayers to *my* children," said Mrs. Skinner sharply. "I don't hold with it. They don't pray, and they don't know anything about religion or about God, and I don't wish them to. You are at liberty to hold what views you like for yourself, of course, but I must beg you not to intrude your opinions on me, or my children."

Lesley was astounded, but she said nothing. Even Mr. Skinner had been taken aback, when he found that his indomitable wife had ruled the Almighty out of her life, along with music-halls and evening parties.

It was seven o'clock by now, and as Lesley followed Mrs. Skinner across the hall, they were met by a jovial little man struggling into a smoking-jacket, as he walked, and whistling the refrain of the latest rag-time. The whistle died away as he caught sight of Lesley, and he made a frantic effort to settle into the arm-holes of his coat.

"Hullo, Ma!" he said genially, but with an air of embarrassment.

"This is my husband, Miss Brydges," said Mrs. Skinner.

That was all the introduction she vouchsafed; Lesley was at a loss whether to shake hands with the little man, or merely to bow. But Mr. Skinner had no hesitation in the matter; his profession had taught him to recognize a lady when he saw one; women free-lances have realized the uses of the pawn-shop in the eking out of a precarious livelihood. He offered a friendly hand. "Pleased to

meet you," he said. "Hope you'll make yourself at home." Then he met his wife's basilisk eye. "How's the baby, Ma?" he asked, to turn the conversation.

This was the first that Lesley had heard about a baby; but later in the evening, when Mrs. Skinner gave her a written list of duties, she found that the wheeling of the baby in a perambulator was included in them.

Mrs. Skinner showed Lesley into a small, dreary room, facing on to a yard. "This is the schoolroom," she said, "though, as a rule, I prefer the children to stay in the dining-room during the daytime, because it is more airy. It is one of your duties to keep this room clean: I myself work in the house, so I don't suppose that you will object to doing your share: and you will take your supper here in the evening."

"Yes," said Lesley, with a sinking heart: her thoughts flew to the merry party who were just sitting down to their evening meal in the convalescent home at Shanklin: they had promised to think of her to-night.

Just then a gong sounded.

"That is the dinner-bell for Mr. Skinner and myself. Will you please go presently into the kitchen and fetch your supper on a tray? After dinner I will come and tell you about your duties."

With that Mrs. Skinner went out and shut the door, leaving Lesley in the dark, cheerless little room: it was raining outside, and the French window rattled dismally, letting in a draught of cold air; the room felt damp and unused. Lesley pulled out a chair and sat down, leaning her elbows on the table, which was covered by an inky cloth, with a pattern of red flowers. Suddenly she felt very hopeless; how she wished that she had been given a bedroom to herself! She wanted to cry, but she knew that she must postpone that luxury: she felt unutterably lonely and depressed.

Minutes passed, and Lesley sat without moving; a wooden clock with an elaborate gilt face ticked pompously on the mantelpiece, but in the deepening gloom Lesley could not read its unfamiliar figures: there did not seem

to be any gas in the room, though there was a lamp on a whatnot in the corner. Lesley did not light it : she prefered to sit in the dark ; it would only serve to illuminate the strangeness of her surroundings, and she guessed from what she had seen already, that they would be distasteful.

Every now and again she heard footsteps outside in the passage—the servant was passing to and fro with dishes from the kitchen to the dining-room. Lesley smiled a twisted little smile as she thought of Mr. and Mrs. Skinner taking their meal in there alone ; she remembered the Ords, and the pompous dinner parties, of which she had not been thought unworthy to partake in their company. And she thought of Frances Bradwell, and the position which she had occupied in her father's home.

Presently the door was opened cautiously, and a widening shaft of light cut the darkness ; it showed the untidy head of the general maidservant.

" My ! " she ejaculated, in a hushed voice, " but it's as cold as a coffin in here, and dark ! Why don't you come and fetch yer supper, Miss ? "

" I don't think I want any supper," said Lesley, with a lump in her throat.

" Go hon ! " said the girl, roughly ; and added, with kindly sympathy : " It's little enough yer gets in this house, anyway. Come an' take yer supper along with Annie and me in the kitchen : it's warm there, and Mrs. Skinner'll never know : I'm just going to take in the sweets."

Lesley followed her into the kitchen : it was full of light and the comfortable smell of cooking : a big fire of red cinders sent out a cheerful warmth : the little kitchen-maid, enveloped in an apron of brown sacking, was clearing a space on the crowded deal table for her supper and Mercy's.

" This 'ere's the kitchen-maid," said Mercy, with a wave of the arm, " a good enough kid, but dirty."

The little Cockney grinned all over her face. " Oh, stow it ! " she said. She gathered the dirty plates, which had been sent down from the dining-room, into a heap,

preparatory to taking them into the scullery. "Yer looks cold, Miss," she said to Lesley.

"I *was* cold," said Lesley, turning to warm herself at the fire: she was fighting the tears that threatened to come into her eyes at the abrupt change from her lonely vigil, in the dark, damp little schoolroom, to this warmth and light and rush of human sympathy. "Can I *really* have supper in here?"

"You bet!" said Mercy, heartily. "Get on with them plates, you kid!"

* * * * * *

When Mrs. Skinner came into the schoolroom she found Lesley sitting by the lighted lamp, looking idly through a torn copy of "Alice in Wonderland."

"I have made out a list of your duties," she began: "I have always found that it's better to portion out each day of the week; I, myself, will superintend everything for the first few days, so that you will see and understand my methods; after that I hope I shall be able to entrust the task to you alone."

Lesley glanced at the paper in dismay; it seemed terribly comprehensive.

Before Breakfast. Give boys one dessertspoonful of Sanatogen in hot milk on waking.

Boys to be dressed and taken down to dining-room. Dust same and lay cloth for breakfast.

7.15. Breakfast.

After breakfast, while boys are having music-lessons, make own and boys' beds, and dust own room and lounge.

8.30 to 10.30. Lessons.

10.30. Give boys hot milk and dress them for walk.

11.0. Walk.

12.0. Undress boys and put them to bed. (*). See below for your own occupation while boys rest.

1.0. Lay cloth for luncheon. After lunch do needle-work, or finish silver.

Take children for walk.
4.30. Nursery tea. Fetch same from kitchen.
Keep boys' clothes tidy and amuse children.
6.0. Commence putting the boys to bed. Bath them.
7.30. Fetch own supper from kitchen.

(*). On Monday between 12 and 1. Clean silver in sideboard drawer.

On Tuesday between 12 and 1. Clean silver in sideboard.

On Wednesday between 12 and 1. Clean silver in Mrs. Skinner's bedroom.

On Thursday between 12 and 1. Clean silver on dining-room sideboard.

On Friday between 12 and 1. Clean silver in hall (including umbrella-handles).

On Saturday between 12 and 1. Clean any silver left over from the week and turn out toy-boxes, et cetera.

The next morning at six o'clock Mercy came in with a cup of tea, as well as the hot milk for the boys.

"I thought you'd like it, Miss," she said. "It's mortal difficult to get up so early when you ain't used to it."

Lesley drank her tea eagerly; George, who, on acquaintance, proved to be, in Mercy's phraseology, "not a bad kid," lay in his bed singing softly to himself.

When Lesley was dressed—she had to wash in cold water—she fetched John, and helped the two boys to get up. Then she took them downstairs with her, while she dusted the dining-room and laid the table for breakfast. At 7.15 Mr. Skinner put in an appearance, and his wife, who had been busy in the kitchen for the last half-hour, came in with steaming platesful of porridge for the boys. Lesley took her food in snatches between keeping the children in order and preparing their food for them—her breakfast consisted of tea and bread and butter. There was fish, as well as jam and marmalade, on the table, but she was not offered any of the hot dish, nor invited to help herself to the condiments.

The meal over, she went upstairs and made her own and the two boys' beds ; then she went down to the cheerless little room, where she had sat the night before, and swept and dusted it ; that over, it was time to take the children's lessons ; and so on through the day. She never had a moment to herself until she had finished putting them to bed, and her only pleasure was when she crept on tiptoe from the chilly schoolroom into the cheery kitchen, after the gong had sounded for dinner, and both Mr. and Mrs. Skinner were safely ensconced in the dining-room.

It was a dreary life with no alleviations, for the children were dull and common, like their parents—even the baby was unattractive, a heavy, red-faced child, who rarely woke out of its stupor except when it was moved to a burst of passion. To make matters worse, Mrs. Skinner had taken it into her head that John, the second boy, had a weak heart. He was her favourite, a fact which puzzled Lesley, for while George was a manly little chap, with good instincts, John, a dark, heavy-jowled child, seemed possessed of the devil of perverseness. He was terribly spoilt, because he knew that he would always get his own way, if he screamed loud enough and long enough ; any agitation was supposed to be bad for his heart ; the result was that he was absolutely uncontrollable. He had only to raise his voice in the well-known yell, for Mrs. Skinner to rush in and demand the cause of the trouble, or to send a message by Mercy to ask Lesley what she was doing to "Master John." On one occasion Mrs. Skinner had even gone so far as to say : "You must ill-treat the child, Miss Brydges. He never screams like that when he is with me."

Lesley hated the whole life ; she could not imagine why Mrs. Skinner had advertised for a lady of good birth and education when what she really needed was a maid-of-all-work. In spite of Mr. Skinner's kindly expressed hope that she would make herself at home, Lesley thought that she had never been in a less home-like atmosphere. She was not allowed for one moment to forget that she was a paid dependant. On the first evening she had, as a

matter of course, gone to the bath-room, imagining that it would be more convenient for Mr. and Mrs. Skinner if she took her bath overnight, instead of in the morning. The next day Mrs. Skinner said to her: "You know, Miss Brydges, we are very pleased for you to use our bathroom, though we don't allow the servants to use it. Personally, I have no feeling in the matter; but Mr. Skinner is very particular about these things; however, we shall be delighted for you to have a bath once a week, if you take your own soap and leave the bathroom tidy."

Lesley was more amused than angry at this development, although she found it inconvenient: her description of the scene, in a letter written a few days later, convulsed Mary: "I was frightfully amused at the idea that I might pollute Mr. Skinner, whom I am afraid you would describe as an awful little rat, in spite of his kindliness of heart."

As a matter of fact, Amos Skinner would have been delighted for Lesley to use the bathroom every day of her life if she wanted to, for it is certain that he himself did not make use of it more than once a week, and his wife never seemed to use it at all. He was kindly disposed towards Lesley, and, though he dared not express an opinion on the matter, he thought that his wife should have allowed her to dine with them in the evening. He was in the habit of bringing some chocolates for the children every Thursday afternoon, which was the only day that he came home before they had gone to bed, it being early closing day at the pawnshop. One Thursday, when Lesley had been in the house for about a month, he said to her, very shyly: "Do you like chocolate, Miss Brydges?" And, when she answered in the affirmative, produced a paper bag out of his pocket, containing a threepenny packet of Peter's milk chocolate. "I always give the children sweeties on Thursday," he said apologetically, "and I thought you might feel that this was more like your own home if I brought you some too."

Lesley was so grateful to him for the kindness of the thought, that she almost conquered her resentment at having to mend the everlasting holes which he wore in his

" pants," because he would carry such cumbersome bundles of keys about with him. At least, that was the only reason she could think of to explain why he wore them out so quickly.

She had to mend all his clothes, as well as the boys', and look after the household linen, so that any spare time she might have had for writing letters or mending her own clothes, while the children were playing quietly together, was entirely filled up. All the time she was at Palace Gardens North, she never opened a book, except at supper, when it was Annie's night out, and Mercy was dishing up the dining-room meal, and disinclined to talk. Then she sat tucked away in a corner of the kitchen, with her book on the table, among the pots and pans and flour canisters and all the paraphernalia of cooking, until it was time for her to return to the schoolroom, lest Mrs. Skinner should discover that she took her supper with the servants.

Nowadays she seemed to be more out of touch with her friends than she had ever been before. Once or twice she went over to see Mary in the evening, but as she could never leave the house before half-past seven, in case the boys did not settle to sleep, and as she had to be back again by ten, so that Mrs. Skinner could lock up the front door, there was not much pleasure in the outing. She was too poor to care to see any of the gay, kind-hearted people, at whose literary and artistic at-homes she had enjoyed herself so much when she first entered Bohemia under the auspices of Reginald Tirebuck and Marian Aylmer. She saw nothing of Tirebuck in these days; even if he had desired a meeting she would have shrunk from it—she was as out of touch with the world, in which he lived and moved and had his being, as any of the other shabbily-dressed women who tramped to and from their work, morning and night, because they could not spare the penny for their bus-fares.

She was absorbed in the great shifting background of the London streets, that kaleidoscope of nameless men and women, who float backwards and forwards on the tide of traffic like seaweed on the surface of the waves, men

and women whose voices we never hear, whose hearts we do not understand, whose lives are hidden from us.

Cotty Verity wrote to her while she was at Shanklin, and Peter wrote to her several times; their letters were forwarded to her at the convalescent home by the landlady of her old rooms in Mimosa Road; but for a month she had had no word from either of them or from Ken Western. She was surprised that Peter had not answered her last letter, in which she told him of her change of plans, and how she intended to try and get work as nursery governess. This was before she answered Mrs. Skinner's advertisement in the *Church Family Newspaper*.

The truth was that Peter had written to her full of enthusiasm about the wonderful new excavations on the Aventine, which were keeping him tied to Rome, but his letter, along with Ken Western's, had been stuck in the plush overmantel at No. 16, Mimosa Road, by the landlady, who was tired of forwarding letters to Shanklin, being convinced that her late tenant must have left there now. "If she wants 'er letters, she'll come and fetch 'em," was her comment.

In the two years, which had elapsed since his mother's death, and his return to Italy, a certain measure of success had attended Ken Western. He had sold a few pictures, and been given a commission by a London publishing house to illustrate a book on Southern Italy. These illustrations were now in the press, and Ken, with two or three hundred Italian sketches to sell, had come back to London intending to rent a studio and, if possible, hold an exhibition while he superintended, as far as he was allowed, the correction of his proofs. Also there was some talk from his publishers of a commission to illustrate a book on London, which might keep him in England for several months. Directly his plans were fixed, Ken wrote as a matter of course to tell Lesley. He received no answer because his letter joined company with the other envelopes addressed to Lesley Brydges on the plush overmantel, which was one of the landlady's treasures in the little stuffy sitting-room at Mimosa Road.

Directly he was settled into his studio Ken called there, and received Mrs. Cummins's unsatisfactory explanation as to the reason why Lesley's letters had not been forwarded to her. He took down the address of the Convalescent Home in Shanklin, and wrote that night to the matron, asking for information. In the meantime, he took away all the letters which were waiting for Lesley to call for them. But two days later, before he had received a reply from Shanklin, he met Lesley face to face in Kensington Gardens.

It was Sunday morning and the bright October sunlight filtering through mists gilded the yellowing trees. Ken did not keep to the paths, he loved to saunter on the grass, trailing his feet, like the boy that he was at heart, among the fallen leaves; it pleased him to hear their crisp rustle as he stirred them; he felt at peace with the world. To-morrow he would hear from Shanklin, and then he would see Lesley, and tell her all about his exciting news. He lifted his eyes; a nursemaid was coming towards him under the trees. His heart leapt within him, for there was Lesley—Lesley in an Edgware Road blouse and a threadbare skirt, wheeling a perambulator with a vulgar, red-faced brat in a red pelisse sitting in it. Like him she had avoided the Broad Walk and the Flower Walk, but not for the same reason; she was walking on the grass among the trees, evading everyone's eyes, because she was so afraid of meeting someone who knew her. She would never have dreamt of walking in Kensington Gardens between eleven and one on Sunday mornings except by the express command of Mrs. Skinner.

When she raised her eyes, and saw Ken coming towards her, she flushed guiltily and turned the perambulator; but Ken ran after her and put a hand on her arm.

"Why, Lesley," he cried, "don't you know me? I *am* glad to see you again after such a long time! You, of all people to meet by chance! Why didn't you leave your address at Mimosa Road? And whatever *are* you doing?"

"Oh, Ken, I am glad to see you! But don't look at

me; isn't it too awful? You must be ashamed to be seen talking to me!"

"Why ever should I be?" asked Ken.

"Well, look at my clothes! And fancy—a perambulator, and this child!" cried Lesley, almost overcome with mortification.

"What does it matter?" said Ken gaily. "The child is horrible, I own, but I'll wheel the perambulator. And, as for clothes, look at mine!"

Lesley did, and saw how threadbare his coat was, and how his shirt was darned at the collar-band, and faded with many washings. Then she looked at his happy eyes, and smiled.

"That's better!" said Ken. "Poverty shan't spoil our happiness. Are we not two friends met together? And is not the sun shining?"

"Oh, Ken, how good it is to hear you talk!" cried Lesley. "You are like Mary Strange: your very presence lifts me out of the Slough of Despond!"

"Mary Strange!" he repeated. "What a beautiful name. Is she a new friend?"

"No. She was at the Buckingham Palace Club for a little time when I first came to London. I always loved her, but we lost sight of each other for some time. Then we lived together at Mimosa Road; did you never meet her at the Club?"

"No," answered Ken gravely, "I'm sure I should not have forgotten."

He paused, and looked at Lesley whimsically. "But tell me, why are you wheeling this horrible child about? I'm glad it's so ugly, though. If it were not, I might be afraid that you had contracted a mésalliance during my absence!"

Lesley laughed outright.

"I am a nursery governess, if you know what that means, Ken. At least they call me a nursery governess, and they advertised for a nursery governess, but I am a sort of 'general' really. The other children are worse than this one, because they are old enough to talk, but

their father always takes them out on Sundays, and drags the poor little wretches about until they're so tired that they do nothing but quarrel for the rest of the day."

"But why are you doing it, Lesley? When you last wrote to me you were being successful at that beastly shop-work. That was bad enough, but this is worse!"

Lesley told him of her break-down, and how she had been forced to give up the work at Hobury's. "There was absolutely nothing else for me to do, Ken," she said simply.

"But there must be heaps of things which you can do."

Lesley smiled. She had never told Ken how hard put she had been to earn a living after she left the Ords, when, for more than three months, every door which she had tried to open had seemed barred to her.

"No, Ken," she said gently, "there are not many ways in which women who are not specially trained can get work at a living wage. If you knew Mary Strange she would tell you more about it than I can, for Mary has lived on starvation wages ever since she came to London. It's not that she's inefficient, it's only that she's out of her proper sphere, which is the case with many of the would-be workers who crowd the waiting-rooms of Agencies and Labour Exchanges, just as a flower, when it grows out of its proper place, is called a weed, and thought only fit for burning.

"She could tell you a long story of women, educated women, who are starving to-day because the price of labour is lowered by the girls who have homes of their own, and who work because they want more pin-money. It is these girls, daughters of well-to-do artisans and small shopkeepers, and the rest, who undercut the wages of us others, who have to work so as to earn bread to feed us and a roof to shelter us. They live at home and only pay their parents a nominal sum for rent and food; the money they earn buys them clothes, enables them to take their pleasures without draining their father's resources, gives them the means of meeting young men who are on the look-out for wives of their class. They are willing to

take ten shillings a week for a pound's worth of work ; and we have to do the same to compete with them. You find it in restaurants, and shops, and workrooms—everywhere where the daughters of artisans are pushing their way up the social ladder. No, there's very little work for the untrained woman to be had at a living wage, unless she is willing to prostitute her personal appearance by working in the shops as a model, or as a chorus-girl in the market-place of Musical Comedy."

"That's rather a strong phrase," protested Ken.

"Not too strong. I was a model-girl at Staidburn's, and I know. You can't class it seriously along with the branches of work which are open to women, because a plain girl couldn't earn her bread that way. And it doesn't carry much of the dignity of work with it ; it's only peacocking."

"Oh, I grant you that," said Ken ; "but surely some of your friends could have helped ?"

"Unfortunately everyone who could have helped was away. That is like London : you can go for months without even setting eyes on friends who are dear to you. Is it surprising if your acquaintances forget you before a week of tides have flowed under Battersea bridge ?"

"Couldn't the Aylmers have helped ?"

"They went to America a week after I left the Ords."

"What about Verity ? Couldn't he do anything ?"

"No," said Lesley rather unsteadily.

Ken looked at her sharply, but Lesley would not meet his eyes.

"What is Agnes Openshaw doing ?" he asked, with apparent irrelevance.

But Lesley had followed his train of thought, and the colour rushed into her face. Seeing her distress, Ken was sorry for his clumsiness the moment he had spoken.

"I don't know," she said. "Let us talk about you now. Are you going to take up with your unnameable papers again ?"

Ken shook his head.

"No," he said, "I gave that up for good. I was doing

it for money; it was the most miserable form of pot-boiling that you could possibly imagine. And what use is money to me, after all? I could never earn enough to be what the world calls rich; I merely earned enough to keep myself in food and lodging, and I can do nearly as well as that with my brushes! My days were given to Mammon, my nights to crying pardon from my god—not the lenient Christ by whom all sins are forgiven, but my own particular god, who would not be gainsaid!"

"You mean your painting?" asked Lesley with shining eyes.

"Yes," said Ken. "If I could have earned enough money to do good either to myself or to others, I would have persevered with the pot-boiling. But I should never have been able to do that, and in any case I am alone in the world; there is only I, myself, and what do I care for poverty? It was different while I had my mother to work for. So my days are my own, and there is never an hour too long! I paint all the time!" Here Ken threw out his arms in a gesture of freedom, careless of the eyes of passers-by. "I even paint in my dreams, for I sleep now at nights, having cried *mea culpa* often enough to satisfy my most exacting god!"

Lesley put her hand on his arm. "I am glad!" she said, with her eyes still shining: she had forgotten all about the Edgware Road blouse, and the perambulator, she cared now no more than Ken whether the people looked curiously at them or not. He had brought a breath out of her old life to her, he had broken down the barrier of her dreary, commonplace existence, bound about with the tiresome details of everyday, and given her a glimpse of the sun shining on the open hills.

"I knew you'd be glad," said Ken, "you always understood. But there were some people who thought I was mad, for it was a long time before I sold a picture, you know. But I did sell one at last! And who do you think bought it?—an old friend of yours."

"I can't guess," said Lesley, wondering whether it was Peter or Cotty.

"Peter Webbe! And it was partly through you that he bought it, so I look to you as my benefactress, madam, because that picture laid the foundation of my future."

"Through me?" repeated Lesley, wondering.

"Yes. It was a sketch of the shrine of Apollo in the garden of the Villa Medici. The roses were wonderful; you remember how they flame at Apollo's feet, and flicker like sparks in the wind up the columns of his niche, a miraculous fire, lighted each spring by the torch of Ceres? Well, Peter Webbe said that it was one of what he called your 'shrines of beauty,' and he bought it in memory of you."

"How dear of him," said Lesley. "It was a favourite haunt of mine, and in April we always visited it together."

There were many of the hard-worked juniors in literature and journalism taking their weekly health reviver in the Gardens that morning. Ken knew some of them, but it never occurred to him to be ashamed of being seen walking with a nursery-maid and a perambulator. One thought she was his wife, and envied them, though he felt that they must be desperately poor for her to dress like that, and be wheeling her own perambulator.

Lesley longed to go up the Flower Walk to see the last of the year's blossoms to remind her of the land of flowers from which she had sprung, but there was an angel with a fiery sword barring the way, and his sword was Shame. For there she would be sure to meet some of the charming and brilliant friends she had known at the Aylmers and elsewhere. Of course they would not know her; but she was haunted by the baseless idea that they would, and, every time she recognized a face, she longed for the earth to open and swallow her up. She could not even trust the Broad Walk, but when she was driven by Mrs. Skinner into the Gardens, took refuge among the trees between the Flower Walk and the Round Pond, where the water-fowl shelter in bad weather.

She walked with Ken till it was time for her to go home to the midday dinner, which she would not have been thought worthy to eat with the Skinners, though she

had shared all the meals of the Ords, who entertained the highest in the land, if she had not been useful in keeping the boys in check. She was terrified of being a minute late; Mrs. Skinner was a bully, and knew how to use her sharp tongue to good effect.

As they were parting Ken said, "May I call upon you this afternoon?"

"Oh, do! But don't come at tea-time. They wouldn't allow me to ask anyone to have a cup of tea."

"What time do they take tea?" asked Ken, laughing.

"Six o'clock. It's tea instead of dinner—the odious thing they call a high tea, though I'm only expected to eat bread-and-butter at it, and I should be called to order pretty sharply if I ventured to help myself to a slice of cold meat, as I did on the first Sunday."

"How abominable! I can't bear to think of you living in a house like that, Lesley!"

"It doesn't matter really: I'm not costing myself anything, and my feet are getting better every week. Soon I shall go back to the shop again. As a matter of fact I don't care at all about their slights; the only thing to which I really do object is the cleaning of their wretched silver."

"Do you have to clean the silver?" asked Ken, disgustedly.

Lesley nodded her head. "I should think I do, and, as you might expect of a pawnbroker, they have so much of it in the house that it takes a solid two hours' work every day; the worst of it is that their plate-powder gives me a sort of hay-fever."

Ken said nothing, but he registered a vow to try and find some other work for her.

"Well, what time shall I come this afternoon?" he asked.

"Come at half-past three. I'm supposed to have from three to five o'clock to myself on Sunday afternoons, only I'm not always free by then, because I'm more slavey than governess."

When Ken arrived and asked for her, he was left standing

in the hall while Mercy fetched, not Lesley, but Mrs. Skinner: she knew it was as much as her place was worth to do otherwise. Mrs. Skinner always engaged servants who were desperately in want of an engagement: no one else would stand her bullying, and she knew it; but she called it charity.

"Young man," she cried, when she came down, "I don't allow followers: I'm afraid that Miss Brydges is the fast kind of young woman who encourages them on the sly: but just let me hear of her ever being seen speaking to you when she is out with my children, and I'll send her packing!"

Ken was boiling with indignation, but he did not answer back: he guessed that she would visit whatever he said on Lesley, and, if her poverty was such that she was willing to continue in these surroundings, it was not for him to do her the injury of robbing her of her post. Mrs. Skinner's behaviour only strengthened him in his resolve to try and get Lesley out of her house; he bowed to the irate woman, and opened the door and let himself out.

Lesley happened to be at the top of the house, so she did not hear what was going on: she might have been tempted to stand up to Mrs. Skinner for Ken, though she no longer had the spirit to stand up to her on her own behalf.

When Ken reached his studio, he wrote to tell Lesley that he had called, but had not been allowed to see her, and he begged her to meet him next Sunday morning at the same time and place.

She answered that she would be there, and he wrote again, a long letter which was not only a letter but a brilliant essay, because he thought that it would cheer her up to have some news from the outside world: she did not acknowledge it; Lesley wrote few letters in those days; she had to consider the postage.

Ken loyally minimized the circumstances attending his exclusion on the previous Sunday, and Lesley, not realizing the virulence, which Mrs. Skinner had imported into it,

said, in good-natured sarcasm, "Old cat! But I suppose it was partly because there was no place for us to meet except my bedroom. The children were in the schoolroom, and dinner was not cleared away in the dining-room, and Mr. Skinner was taking his siesta with his boots off in the drawing-room. I should have had to receive your confidences in the hall!"

"Well, we can always meet here," said Ken. "The air is the Lord's. And in the Park, if nowhere else, there is the right of free speech."

The end came all too soon. It being Mr. Skinner's habit to take his depressed little boys out for a walk on Sunday morning, he chanced next week to choose the Round Pond as the scene for this performance. On the way there, he stumbled upon Lesley and Ken, seated side by side on chairs below the trees, deep in conversation, while Lesley kept the baby crowing by running the perambulator backwards and forwards with her left hand. The fact that the baby was perfectly happy, and receiving her attention all the time, did not affect the Skinner judgment. She was guilty of the crime of talking to a young man, a young man,—like herself, superior in social status to her employers.

This was a case of *lèse-majesté*, and as such was duly reported to Mrs. Skinner.

When Lesley reached the house, Mrs. Skinner met her at the door.

"This day month, you baggage, out you go! I'm not going to have my child taught sin by you, and that low fellow, who was hanging about here the other day." The baby was too young for any but original sin, not yet having learned to speak: this was nothing; the dignity of the house of Skinner had been outraged, and Mrs. Skinner considered it necessary to make an example of the offender.

But she had mistaken her victim. Lesley, enfeebled by misfortune and bad health, had allowed herself to be bullied, and Mrs. Skinner took her to be one of the worms she had first trampled on, because they had fallen too far for them to turn, and then kicked out, in a fairly

steady procession. She kept Mr. Skinner by her side, because he had found Lesley out in her sin, which was sitting beside Ken Western amid thousands of happy air-seekers in Kensington Gardens on a Sunday morning. She turned round to give her husband a look of triumph when she had delivered her philippic against Lesley.

But the worm was turning: anger brought the blood back to Lesley's cheeks, and made her once more the old Lesley, who had ridden so straight to hounds across the fields of Rome. She looked the red-faced Mrs. Skinner straight in the eyes and said: "How dare you speak to me like this! I shall be only too glad to go: you engaged me as a nursery governess, but you have tried to make a servant of me. As for the children's lessons, you interfere with them all the time, and make my work useless; there is no one to teach except you, and no one could teach you to look, speak, or behave like a lady."

To say that Mrs. Skinner was dumbfounded fails to express the entire situation. Lesley thought she would very likely be turned out of the house that afternoon. She was too angry to care if she was: she was too angry to think whether she had a place to go to or not; she was only determined that not once more should Mrs. Skinner browbeat her, after the insult she had offered to Ken Western, through her, in the presence of the entire household.

But it did not suit Mrs. Skinner to send her away without notice, for a successor had to be provided: and it was not easy to find a successor for her household, because she had the worst name of the whole neighbourhood at the registry offices; victims who would not resist her impositions did not come into the offices every day. She prefered unmarried women who had been in trouble for having babies: as a class, they were the most broken-spirited and bullyable.

Mr. Skinner protested. "Ma, you go a little far with that tongue of yours; she's the most respectable girl we ever had." He felt that she would have been a protection from his wife's ill-temper, which made him stay

as late as he could at the pawnbroker's shop, that provided their sustenance. He was not sure whether he admired Lesley's spirit or her good looks most; he had ideas of making proposals to her which might nearly have driven her to throw herself off the bridge at Hammersmith, but his business involved a power to read character, and he saw the impossibility. He was afraid that Lesley would want to go before her time, but she had to go straight into a new situation, and she could not afford to lose the money by going before her notice was up. Also her fighting spirit was roused, and, much as she hated vulgar altercations, she almost looked forward to the opportunity of getting even with Mrs. Skinner.

In the interval she wrote to Ken, saying that she had received notice, though she did not state the cause, and she bought some stamps and a sixpenny box of stationery, and, when she took the Skinner children out for their daily airing, studied the advertisements in the *Telegraph* and the *Chronicle*, which were pasted up outside the Free Library. It did not occur to her how changed her view of life was, since she first went to the Free Library to read through the advertisements. Then she had felt embarrassed, and ill at ease, even in the comparative seclusion of the reading-room; now she stood boldly in the street, with her hand on the perambulator, scanning the columns side by side with the neediest-looking apprentices and work-room hands.

The amiable children, when they came in, sneaked to their mother about it. "Ma, will you tell Miss Brydges not to make us stand outside the Library while she reads the papers."

Mrs. Skinner flew into one of her coarse furies: Lesley was not in the least daunted. "You ought to have more respect for your children," she said coolly at the end of a violent tirade, "than to let them see you in your true colours: I have a right to do what I can to get a new situation now that you have given me notice."

"You impudent hussy," said Mrs. Skinner, but she postponed further measures till her husband came back

in the evening: he knew the Pawnbrokers' Act so well, that she imagined him to be an authority on the whole law of England.

"You can't get out of it," he said unsympathetically, "unless you take the papers in for her to read them here."

"Well, I'd rather do that than let my children lose their character by standing about in the streets."

Mr. Skinner was sure that Lesley would prefer it also, but he did not express his opinion; experience had taught him that the cause would prosper best in silence.

"She's so perverse," said Mrs. Skinner at last, "I hardly like to ask her."

"I'll do it," said Mr. Skinner. "You go upstairs and look after the children, and send her down to me."

Lesley expected a fresh battle, but Mr. Skinner explained diplomatically, that rather than deprive the children of part of their walk, he would take in the *Telegraph* and the *Chronicle* till she was suited.

"Run over to Hake's and order them," he said. Hake's was the general shop at the corner: he expected her to go out in the street without her hat, like Mercy, the general.

"Thank you," said Lesley, "but I will order them to-morrow morning."

As she went upstairs, she heard him go out of the house: he was going to Hake's himself; he did not suppose that Lesley would repeat their conversation to his wife.

"I've ordered the papers," he puffed out when he came back, "I shall enjoy having a look at them when I get back at night."

"She's a devil, that girl," said his wife.

"She's the best we ever had," he replied, as if they were accustomed to have devils to attend on them, like a Japanese god. "Poor devils" they did always have. But Mrs. Skinner was not thinking of that.

Lesley was really disquieted in her soul, when she had scanned the advertisements for over a week and found not a single situation vacant for which she could apply, although there were no less than sixty people needing house-parlourmaids.

Why should she not be a house-parlourmaid? she asked herself at last. Except that she was not supposed to take her meals with Mercy, but in her own room, nothing could be more menial than her present situation, and if she were a house-parlourmaid, at least she would be treated with consideration.

She answered an advertisement in Maida Vale. She could not recollect having any friends in that direction to see her run out to the post in a print dress and a cap. She said in her letter that she must have her fare if she came over to see the lady: the reply enclosed a postal order for a shilling.

Mrs. Andrewes, of 36, Regent Mansions, Maida Vale, was charmed with Lesley's appearance, and her way of speaking, but there were difficulties on the threshold: Lesley had to confess that she had no proper dresses, and no money to buy them with.

"Well," said Mrs. Andrewes, "if your references are satisfactory, I could advance you the money for them, and let you pay back so much a month out of your wages." She did not want to lose this girl if she could help it.

"I'm afraid I haven't got any references as a parlourmaid," said Lesley faintly: Mrs. Skinner had taken her powers of tuition so much on faith, that she had not remembered how large a part references played in the engaging of domestic servants.

"Then you've never been a parlourmaid?" asked Mrs. Andrewes. She was very interested in the shabbily dressed but lady-like girl.

"No," said Lesley, "but I know their duties, and I clean all the silver and mend the household linen in the place I am in now."

"What were you engaged as?"

"A nursery-governess," said Lesley.

Mrs. Andrewes made no comment, but she took a mental note of it. "And had you no references for this post?" she asked.

"Only references as to my respectability," answered Lesley.

Mrs. Andrewes thought for a minute or two: she was quite convinced that Lesley was not only respectable but capable. Presently she said: "I think the best way is for you to send me the references which you showed to your late mistress, and also ask her to write a character for you."

Lesley went away feeling very depressed; she was quite certain that Mrs. Skinner would not give her the sort of character which would help her to get work of any kind. Nor was she wrong in her surmises: when Lesley asked her for a character, Mrs. Skinner felt that it was her turn again: she flatly refused.

Lesley went to Mr. Skinner about it, as she had found him a little more reasonable. He had the wisdom of the serpent: "You can't refuse to give her a character, Ma, or she'll have the law on you. But she has not been with you as a house-parlourmaid, and from what you have seen of her, you have no reason to suppose that she is suited to be one; she has a habit of answering back that some ladies might not like."

Mrs. Skinner put all this into a letter, so commonly and venomously worded, that Mrs. Andrewes came over to see what sort of a woman Mrs. Skinner was. She herself was the wife of a rising young architect, and exceedingly particular about her servants; she chose them mostly by their physiognomy, in which she judged of their intelligence for training.

Mrs. Skinner received her; she was only too glad to have the opportunity of denouncing Lesley. But her denunciations were a recommendation; Mrs. Andrewes felt that at all costs she must get Lesley out of her clutches. She waived the question of experience: she was certain of her ability to train such a girl. And so it came about that Lesley Brydges found herself confessedly in service in a flat in Maida Vale.

CHAPTER XVII

LESLEY BECOMES A HOUSE-PARLOURMAID AND CAUSES A REVOLUTION IN JOURNALISM

AS Lesley regained her health with good food and kind treatment—the servants' table at Mrs. Andrewes' gave her better feeding than she had received since she left Rome except for the time when she was living at the Ords'—Mrs. Andrewes was amazed with her attractiveness: her figure looked so neat in the black parlourmaid's dress, and the white cap brought out her colouring.

She had written to Ken about her dismissal the very night that she received her notice, and had posted the letter on the following day; ever since then, he had been engaged in a fruitless endeavour to find her a journalistic post, on the strength of her experience with Meyer Bayswater. In despair he bethought him of their mutual friends to see which of them could be brought to help; he considered the Aylmers first, of course, but he told himself that they were not really suitable, even if they were back in town, and he soon discovered that they were not, because they would get some friend to make a place for her, an unreal place, and she would go on drifting

Clarence Verity certainly would not do; Ken had not asked Lesley for his whereabouts, and since he had not been in Rome for some months, because he had been painting in the south of Italy, he did not know that

Clarence was living in the Brydges' old flat. As Lesley had not mentioned Clarence's name in their talks, he guessed that the topic was a sore one.

Tirebuck! What of Tirebuck? Yes, Tirebuck might be the man, because he was a power in journalism. But would Tirebuck do anything? He had had the chance of helping before when Lesley gave up her work on *Last Week*. At anyrate, he must have known that she was in low water, when she appealed to him. Lesley told Ken how she had gone to him, in her narrative of her struggle to find work during the lean months before she became a model at Staidburn's. And he had done nothing. Still, Tirebuck seemed to be the best chance, and Ken decided that he would go to him; he was finally nerved to do it when Lesley transfered herself to Maida Vale; it hurt him to think of her as a servant. He wrote to Tirebuck asking him to make an appointment: he told him that he wanted to speak about Miss Brydges, who was in a situation which was perfectly all right in its way, but one which was quite unsuited to her station.

Tirebuck hardly remembered him, though they had met occasionally in the days when Ken was sub-editing, but he thought it so decent of him to worry about Lesley that he asked him to dinner to talk it over.

When Ken arrived at Mount Street, his host said: "Let's eat our dinner in peace before we tackle our troubles. My servant," he added as the man left the room to bring in the soup, "knows Miss Brydges; she came here once when my aunt was staying with me."

At dinner they talked Art and curios. Was not Tirebuck one of the most popular writers of the day upon collecting?

After the coffee and liqueurs had been brought, and his man had left them to their cigarettes, Tirebuck said: "Now tell me about Miss Brydges! I am very interested in her. As a matter of fact, I have not seen or heard anything of her for over a year; she came to see me then because she thought I might help her to find some journalism to do. I'm afraid that I wasn't much good.

Then later she wrote to me that she was in work again—she didn't say where. Some time after I 'phoned her at the Club where she used to live, but they said she had left and they didn't know her address; I thought she must have gone back to Italy."

"Shall I begin at the beginning or the end?"

"Oh, at the beginning; I should like to know as much as you can tell me."

Ken recounted pretty briefly the drawbacks which had made Lesley throw up her post at *Last Week*, her secretaryship to Lucas Ord, M.P., her situations at Staidburn's and Hobury's. But when he came to her sufferings as Mrs. Skinner's nursery-governess, the whole character of his narrative changed, and he used such burning words that Tirebuck regarded him with blank surprise. Finally he came to the situation which Lesley was filling at Maida Vale; this seemed to get Tirebuck on the raw; his conventional mind could grasp the degradation of her position as a domestic servant, where it had failed to understand the gradual steps, which Lesley had been forced by circumstances to take down the social ladder, ever since the death of Major Waugh. He rose from his seat and ramped up and down the room.

"Lesley Brydges a servant!" he cried. "Lesley Brydges a parlourmaid! and living in a wretched little flat in Maida Vale! Oh, it's preposterous!"

Then he sat down again and knitted his brows in silence; his cigarette went out, but he did not light another.

At length he said: "Look here, Western, we must do something for her; this can't be allowed to go on! I wonder where that stepmother of hers is living?"

"I have been trying to do something for her for a month past," said Ken, ignoring the reference to Esme Brydges; "but I'm such a minnow that I can manage nothing; that's why I came to you."

"But what can I do that you can't?"

"You have influence. I have none."

"What sort of influence have I?"

"You can go to all your editors and ask them to give work to a friend of yours who is . . . say whatever you think best about her, and add that she is a very capable journalist, who filled a responsible post under Bayswater, the editor-proprietor of *Last Week*."

"I'm sure she's capable enough, but they won't listen to me."

"Then give her some devilling to do for yourself: there is more than one paper which would like a column edited by you on any subject; they would not expect you to write it, Miss Brydges could do that and take half the money. All you need to do would be to give it your name, and put in little touches."

"I couldn't do that," said Tirebuck, rather nettled, because he prided himself on his precious style, "it would not be honest."

"It isn't honest. I know that, but it goes on all the time on newspapers. At any rate, can't you do something for her?"

"I don't know. I'll try. I always liked Miss Brydges, and of course I had no idea she was having such a hard time; she didn't tell me half enough about her difficulties, when she came to see me."

"She wouldn't," said Ken dryly.

"It makes me sick to think of her being a servant," said the conventional Tirebuck. "Where does she live?"

"36, Regent Mansions, Maida Vale."

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Have you a telephone, Western?"

"There's one for general use at our studios. 1856 Fulham."

"Mine is 3456 Mayfair."

The next day at about half-past three Tirebuck took a taxi to 36, Regent Mansions.

The door was opened by Lesley. She flushed when she saw who it was, but she did not speak; she was suffering the bitterness of humiliation that Tirebuck, the most conventional man in her whole acquaintance, should see her dressed as a servant, answering the door-bell.

Tirebuck raised his hat, and held out his hand. "Good afternoon, Miss Brydges," he said.

Lesley ignored the outstretched hand; she felt a wave of resentment at his friendliness, at his assumption of pleasure in their meeting—at the faultlessness of his clothes, and his ease of manner.

"Have you come to see Mrs. Andrewes?" she asked, coldly.

"No, I have come to see you."

"Who told you I was here?"

"Kenneth Western. Is there any place where I can have a talk with you?"

Lesley hesitated; for Ken's sake she felt that she could not send him away: at last she said: "If you give me your card, Mr. Tirebuck, I'll ask Mrs. Andrewes."

He gave her the card; she received it on a tray, and went to a room at the end of the passage. He heard a "Come in" in a pleasant, clear voice, and in a minute or so a woman, young and quite Parisian in her elegance, came out holding his card, followed by Lesley with the tray.

"Mr. Tirebuck?"

"Yes."

She waited for him to proceed.

Reginald Tirebuck was not afflicted with nerves; the only thing he stood in awe of was conventionality. But Lesley's cold reception, and the fact that he had to explain himself on the doorstep, disconcerted him; he had never felt so ill at ease before. After a short pause he said, lamely: "I came to ask if I might talk with Miss Brydges for a little while: I know her people."

Mrs. Andrewes turned round to Lesley for corroboration, but Lesley, like a well-trained servant, had gone back to her pantry.

"You have come to take her away from me," said Mrs. Andrewes, engaging his eyes.

"Yes. That is to say, not this minute, but when it can be arranged."

"Of course, I knew she was not an ordinary servant from the moment that she came into the house. I did not ask

her for any explanation, because I saw that it would be painful to her, and I won't ask you for any. All I do ask of you is that you should give me your word of honour that you really are a friend of her family."

He gave her the assurance with a little smile, and a gentlemanly and convincing straightforwardness.

"You can see her, of course," said Mrs. Andrewes, going along to the pantry to fetch Lesley, and tell her to take Tirebuck to the drawing-room for their talk.

But there he found that everything was not to be plain-sailing. To begin with, Lesley would not sit down, but stood just inside the door, in the attitude of a servant. So Tirebuck remained standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, in front of the arm-chair, which he had intended to occupy. Though, in her heart, Lesley knew that Tirebuck had come out of kindness and a genuine desire to help, just as he had been moved to give her the letter of recommendation to Major Waugh's friend before she left Rome, she felt furious at the humiliation of meeting him. And she allowed herself to believe that he had come to patronize her with long-delayed offers of help, now that she had sunk so low. "If he can help me now, he could have helped me then!" she said to herself, as she waited in the pantry while Mrs. Andrewes spoke to Tirebuck at the front door, remembering how she had gone to him in the Spring of the year before, when work was so difficult to find.

She had always resented his immaculateness of attire and manner; her femininity was antagonistic to him as a type, in spite of the reluctant admiration, which she ceded to him because he was so very competent in everything that he attempted. This was in the old days, but now, with her own hands roughened by work, with her nails unmanicured, and her feet in old house-shoes, she hated him for his spick-and-spanness. It was not so much that she herself felt any degradation in her position. She did not care how often Ken saw her, even in her cotton morning frock; but she knew the quality of Tirebuck's mind.

She waited for him to begin, rejoicing in his discomfiture.

Tirebuck wished devoutly that he had written instead of coming in person.

"I came to try and get you out of this, Miss Brydges."

"I don't want to get out of it: I should have nothing to do if you succeeded."

"But it must be hateful to you to associate with the other servants."

"There is only the cook, and she is one of my dearest friends."

"But it must be rather a trial to sit down to meals with her," urged Tirebuck, feeling that he was going to have difficulty in persuading this extraordinary girl to give up her menial work.

"I assure you, my meals with her are the pleasantest things I have to look forward to in the day," said Lesley, taking a malicious pleasure in Tirebuck's crestfallen expression.

"Then you mean that you don't want to leave the place?" he queried, rather at a standstill.

Lesley said nothing for a minute. When she did open her lips, it was to say irrelevantly: "Why have you come to disturb my peace, Mr. Tirebuck? I thought that I had found a haven at last!"

"Because it isn't fit work for you to be doing. A lady in full possession of her youth and health has no right to drop out of her position without making an effort."

"An effort!" said Lesley bitterly. "Do you think I have made no efforts! I have tried every possible opening, but there is no work to be had at a living wage for an untrained woman like myself, except domestic service. There are the shops, of course, and next year I hope to go back to them; but in the meantime I am contented enough where I am!"

"But it's so—so degrading, to be a servant," said Tirebuck.

"There's nothing degrading about it, except in the minds of people like yourself!" cried Lesley.

"Well, perhaps degrading is not the right word: but you know what I mean, it's such menial work."

"Menial work! Of course it's menial work, because that's how we're taught to look upon it. But there's no reason why it should be considered to be either menial or degrading! After all, aren't the looking after a house and the working of a house the natural spheres for a woman? It's the attitude of society towards housework which makes it degrading, just as it's the foolish, vulgar, snobbish wish for display which makes people ashamed of doing housework, and yet unashamed to hire other women to do what they should be doing themselves, instead of living beyond their incomes and leaving their children a heritage of debts instead of an education.

"I'm sick of this country, where women are looked down upon and despised, where they are jeered at because they happen to be the sex which predominates in the population; where, if they take up any interest, no matter whether it is athleticism or the Suffrage, they are supposed to be moved by sex-disappointment. Everywhere you go, you hear men cheapening women: the meanest little whipper-snapper in the streets thinks he is qualified to have a fling at her. He rolls the word Suffrage round his mouth, and utters the usual platitudes about the mental and physical superiority of his sex; he spouts aphorisms about the unfitness of women for this, that, and the other, and then winds up with a complacent jest about there being seven women to every man in the United Kingdom, whereas there are not two to one and never will be. To hear him you would say that men had forgotten that they were born of women! But what does he do, may I ask, to better the position of this great mass of women who so outnumber him in the population of the country? Does he try to give them occupations and interests; does he seek to utilize the great force for good which they should represent? Not he! We have to fight every inch of the road towards a living wage, and no one stretches out a hand to lighten the burden!—No one, that is, unless he takes a heavy toll!

"And then you come along and tell me that I am degrading myself, because I am earning an honest living

by doing the most obvious woman's work. How fortunate it is that degradation comes from within and not from without! *I* find no degradation in it; it is the only work I have had any training for. There should be no more slur in it and no more talk of meniality than there is in the Colonies; and if there was none, England would have another fifty thousand servants of the highest class, which would mean an equal number of ladies removed from indigence and anxiety, and twenty or thirty thousand housekeepers relieved of their worst trouble."

"I quite agree with you: but I think that you should be managing an association or something of the sort to promote your ideas, or writing about it, instead of trying to qualify as one of the servants," said Reginald Tirebuck, whose conventional soul was thoroughly shocked by Lesley's free speaking. He thought her arguments extremely illogical, but had the tact to refrain from saying so.

"I'm afraid you are prejudiced, Mr. Tirebuck," said Lesley, mollified, in spite of herself, by the patience with which he had listened to her.

"Perhaps I am," said Tirebuck, "but it doesn't seem very reasonable to me that you should rejoice in doing manual work, for which, according to your argument, there are so many other women equally fitted, when you yourself are capable of bigger things. Besides, have you forgotten the kind of life that you were born-to, in that beautiful Italian home of yours?"

Lesley said nothing: she could not trust herself to speak. Tirebuck's words were like the clumsy touch of unaccustomed fingers on an unhealed wound; they wrenched away brutally the veil which Time had woven round her memories; they made her realize more keenly than anything else could have done, the hopelessness which was the ruling quality of her mind in these days.

Reginald Tirebuck did not understand her silence. "Don't you want to get back into that sphere of life again?" he urged. "Not necessarily in Italy, but here in London?"

Lesley was goaded into speech. "Have you no imagination?" she cried fiercely. "There was a time when I almost sold myself, yes, like any other woman sells herself, just to go back! How could you understand! Sometimes I wonder if people like you have any idea what it is to *feel*, you who are lapped in luxury, to whom beautiful things are given for the asking, who are free to go where you will, with leisure to enjoy the beauty of the world! You have not known what it is to be hungry, yes, hungry, and not for food only—a dry crust eases that pain!—but hungry for life and all the fullness of living, which we are taught from our childhood to look forward to as our birthright. Think what life would be to you, if you were starved for all the joys and interests which make it up! That is what happens to most of the women who grind through the day, and often into the night, for the miserable pittance which will suffice to keep body and soul together. Think of their girlhood, sheltered for the most part, at any rate in their earlier years, when their minds are filled with romances and dreams, when their capacity for enjoyment is fed with little gaieties, when they are taught to look forward to love and marriage and their own home as the ultimate crown of womanhood! Even the books they read are chosen with a view to foster dreams. All the gross things of life are kept away from them—it is dreams they are fed on, dreams, dreams, dreams! And then they are turned out to face reality! Oh, I can tell you it is very bitter for some of them. And the cruellest part of the system is that the best women are the hardest hit"—Lesley was thinking of Mary Strange now, and her long struggle against circumstances—"they come to grief so easily when they have to fend for themselves. And it's not to be wondered at, because the traitor who opens the door is sheltered in their own hearts. All these women ask is that they may be necessary, and if Providence throws them in the path of selfish people, or those of little understanding, they give and give until they are no longer needed, and then they live in their own little hell of burnt-up memories!

"And you come and ask, and ask again, if I forget the kind of life that I was born-to! Because I had not sufficient courage to take the only road back to it, have you come to throw stones at me for doing honest work?"

Tirebuck was startled out of his composure. "I'm most frightfully sorry," he said, overcome with remorse at his own clumsiness. "You must know how far it is from my mind to throw stones at you; I only wanted to help; it distressed me so to hear of you doing this sort of work."

He hesitated. In spite of Lesley's uncompromising attitude about leaving her present situation, he was loath to go without one more effort.

"I can't bear to think of you sitting down to meals with the cook!" he blurted out. "Do you really mean to say that you want to stay in this place?"

Lesley said nothing for a minute; then her sense of humour overcame her perverseness: besides, she was really grateful to Tirebuck for the concern he so evidently felt.

"Well, it isn't exactly ideal," she said, with a sudden smile. "But I was more thankful than I can tell you to get it, and really I am not unhappy; Mrs. Andrewes is very kind to me."

Tirebuck was much relieved by Lesley's change of manner; he showed it by the way in which he deposited his hat on the arm-chair by which he had been standing all this time, and took up a stance on the hearthrug.

"One thing is certain," he said. "You cannot remain in service."

"But what can I do?" asked Lesley.

"I don't know at present, but I'll find something: will you leave the matter in my hands—and Mr. Western's?"

Lesley's eyes met his gratefully: he was so palpably sincere.

"You are very kind to me," she said, "and I am afraid I was rather rude."

"Not at all," said Tirebuck formally, making haste to depart. He hated to be thanked: it always embarrassed

him. Also, not understanding the vagaries of the feminine mind, he could find no clue to explain the sudden change in Lesley's manner, and he was afraid that he might accidentally say or do something which would put her on the defensive again.

As he drove away in the taxi which he had retained, because he considered Maida Vale in the wilderness, he felt more rudely disturbed in his self-esteem than he had been for years. Fancy Lesley Brydges a servant! And full of such curious socialistic ideas! It was tragic. He felt that it was his duty to get her out of such a position, but how?

His mind naturally turned to journalism, his own profession, and he went to see the Editor of *The Carlton*, one of the principal papers for which he worked.

He saw him at his home, for he was semi-paralysed. Richard Abingdon was a big fair man—a Rubens come to life again, who looked the picture of health, though he could not move. Tirebuck went to him because he knew that he did not believe in names; he professed to select a staff of competent writers, and distribute his own ideas among them to be written-on. His success was due to his instinct for divining the side issues, the minor questions in which the Public was interested for the moment, and the forceful and original way in which he treated them.

He seldom wrote the article himself, he dictated a summary of his idea to his stenographer, and kept it by him till the next Thursday; on Thursday afternoons he was at home to the women of his staff; the men were welcome to come either in the afternoon or the evening; but few came in the afternoon, because at night between nine and three or four o'clock in the morning, amid the consumption of much whisky and bottled beer and tobacco, the genius of their chief was ablaze.

On Thursday morning those, for whom he had commissions that week, received a formal postcard, asking them to call for instructions about an article (and, as far as he could, he gave each of them an article to write every week). Those who had no

commission were welcome to attend, and generally did attend, because on Thursday night Abingdon outlined the coming issue of his paper. He had his list of articles, his table of contents, and the headings he had dictated, before him and for an hour or two he preached on them. He did not resent interruptions, he welcomed them; and when he wished the suggestions incorporated in the summaries, he made a sign to his stenographer. He was a bold man who made a futile suggestion when Abingdon was wound up and holding forth, for the lion (the great man had a tawny leonine mane) turned upon him and rent him with withering vehemence.

When he had talked out the coming issue he distributed the commissions for the articles to his contributors, like a Prime Minister distributing the portfolios for his Cabinet, and they relapsed into general conversation, or more often into listening to their chief discoursing in his brilliant fashion about anything and everything. It was at these ambrosial nights that he trained them to write the articles, as he would have written them himself. They were welcome to bring any friends whom they thought worthy of being introduced to the mighty Abingdon—there was nothing he wished kept private about the incubation of the paper. The stranger was as welcome to make suggestions as any member of the staff. And if he made brilliant and pregnant suggestions was quite likely to be asked to write on them for *The Carlton*.

Reginald Tirebuck, in spite of his artificialities and his affectations, was one of the most valued members of the staff; he edited "Christie's" for the paper. Mr. Abingdon had divined the immense interest which is really attached to the proceedings of that Stock Exchange of Art, and required a connoisseur to write about them, as the City editor of a weekly paper writes his features of the week, and his forecasts about the Stock Exchange. He knew that there was no man in Journalism for whose opinion collectors had more respect than Tirebuck's.

He was also interested in Tirebuck as a literary sur-

vival, a man who kept up the Count d'Orsay tradition in his writing and, as far as more modest circumstances permitted, in his life. He knew that Tirebuck frankly disliked his nights, that he hated the heavy drinking and smoking, the licentiousness which so often crept into his brilliance, the roughness of some of the diamonds who scintillated in his paper, and pervaded his house on Thursday nights—even the lateness of the hours. He often wondered why he did not come with the ladies.

But Tirebuck was connoisseur enough to appreciate the value of those nights, so he came and listened. He sometimes cynicized in a low voice to the men whom he chose to sit beside, but he never raised his voice to offer any contribution to the discussion, which was so nearly a monologue from Abingdon.

He knew that he would have a better chance of a private talk with Abingdon in the afternoon than in the evening; the sight of women, except his fair, patient wife, grated on the cripple, they reminded him of his infirmity, for he was of the type which makes a gallant lover. He was always glad when men came in the afternoon for him to talk to. He considered a few women necessary to the production of a good paper, but he talked to them as little as possible, when he had finished his editorial instructions.

He greeted Tirebuck rather formally; a large, sensual, vehement nature like Abingdon's had little in common with Tirebuckism. But he respected Tirebuck, a journalist by profession, and inferior to none in his own line, who positively refused to be hail-fellow-well-met with the journalists whose manners and habits were distasteful to him.

"How do you do, Abingdon?"

"How are you, Tirebuck?"

"Can I have a word with you presently?"

"Got something to spring on me? Well, ask my wife to give you a cup of tea, and I'll get through my business with the female necessaries of my staff."

Mrs. Abingdon attended to Tirebuck's physical wants in an impassive manner; her energies were absorbed

in patching up her husband's health. His eternal cigar-smoking and whisky-drinking, though they did not affect his head, were hard on the health of a man entirely prevented from taking the exercise which would have been natural to such a frame, such a roystering disposition. She liked Tirebuck; he was one of the few gentlemen on the staff of *The Carlton.* It was odd that a paper, with such a very conservative name and principles, should be written chiefly by Scotsmen of humble birth, but it was a fact that Abingdon did surround himself with men who were common in their appearance, and their way of talking, as well as their origin.

When he had finished his tea and made himself agreeable to his hostess for a little while, Tirebuck went back to Abingdon on his invalid couch, and found him free.

"What is it, Tirebuck?" he asked, in his downright way.

"Can you find room on your staff—not among the article-writers, but in Kyd's part" (Kyd was the news-editor) "for a capable lady, one whom you could send to do your politicians' opinions on leading questions, where the people are ceremonious?" Richard Abingdon was quite alive to the value of interviewing politicians for these opinions, though he thought the procedure vulgar.

"Has she any experience?"

"Yes, on *Last Week.* She worked several departments there, and I believe that—I've forgotten who runs it—offered to double her salary, if she would stay with him."

"Why did she leave?"

"The usual story: he began to make love to her."

"She's pretty, then; he wouldn't run risks for nothing when she was useful to the paper."

Tirebuck did not like discussing Lesley in this way, but he said:

"Yes, she is very attractive."

"No, my boy!" (Tirebuck winced.) "I don't think she'll do for us. We never have engaged anyone for

personal reasons on this paper; we've always gone for people of outstanding ability, purely on their merits."

"I'm sorry that you can't see your way to oblige me, Abingdon."

"So am I. I'd sooner do it for you than most."

"Well, good-bye."

"Good-bye, Tirebuck."

The next editor he went to was Kineton of the *Strand Gazette*, a tall, thin young man, very particular about his dress, who owed his success largely to his stammer, which gave him time to think while he was dealing with a contributor; he found this useful in fixing the price for the articles he desired to commission; the syndicate which ran the paper did not give him much rope in this direction. He hardly ever accepted an article which was sent to him unsolicited; he liked his articles to be exclusively topical. Like Abingdon, he chose the subjects which he considered uppermost in people's thoughts, and commissioned clever journalists to write them. It was only once in a way that he wrote to Tirebuck for an article, because Tirebuck would not budge from his price, and he had to get the directors to pass the higher fee. Sometimes, when a Leonardo da Vinci was stolen, or a Velasquez was discovered, his name was necessary; and then they grumbled and paid.

Because the paper was economically run Tirebuck thought they might be glad to give Lesley a salary, and let her do "whatever came along."

But Kineton said, "I'm not going to insult you, Tirebuck, by offering any friend of yours the kind of rates we give for this sort of thing; it's sweating, pure and simple, the way we do it in this office."

He tried the remaining papers for which he worked, one after another; the *Illustrated Metropolitan News*, a conservatively managed affair, whose very pleasant editor said he had no vacancies; the *King and Queen*, which wanted Lesley to invest three hundred pounds to earn a salary of a hundred and fifty; the *Woman of the World*, and the rest of them. One thing was plain

about them all, that they were so worried by would-be contributors, that no one had any chance with them except the newspaper virago, who would not take "no" for an answer.

Life had been so easy for Tirebuck, he had been so accustomed to receiving invitations from editors to join their staffs, that he simply could not understand anyone with the proper qualifications being unable to get work on a newspaper, when he or she wanted to. He had to take serious counsel with himself; Lesley could not be allowed to remain a servant—that was clear; but how was he to find a position for her which would enable her to get out of it?

It was gradually borne in upon him that it had to be done *vi et armis*, that editors would do nothing unless their hands were forced, because their hands constantly were being forced, and there was not enough work to go all round. But he thought forcing hands and bluffing and all that sort of thing, except in curio-shops, bad form.

The simplest thing for him to do would be to adopt Ken Western's suggestion to arrange for a paper to publish a weekly article over his signature, which would be written by Lesley and touched-up into form by him, the five guineas to be paid to him, and he to hand over to Lesley as much of it as he thought fit.

But this he considered dishonest, and could not contemplate.

What was he to do? One thing he was incapable of doing—turning back. When Reginald Tirebuck had set his hand to the plough, he never did turn back. He thought and thought, and think as much as he would, but one light fell on the subject: he must urge Abingdon, the only editor whom he considered under an obligation to him, again and more strongly, to find a place for Lesley to oblige him.

Abingdon was of course always at home; being a cripple he could not be otherwise. So, without waiting for a Thursday, Tirebuck went to call upon him. As he had anticipated, Abingdon consented to see him, though

he had definitely announced to all his staff that they would prejudice their relations with him if they came on any day but Thursday.

Abingdon was noted for his brusqueness, and, though he received Tirebuck cordially, came to the point at once.

"I suppose you've come about that girl?"

"Yes," said Tirebuck laconically.

"Well, I told you that I can do nothing for her."

Tirebuck coloured painfully. It was almost the first direct set-back he had ever had in his profession; but he had come prepared for it, and had made up his mind how he meant to act.

"Then I must ask you to get someone else to undertake the department which I have been conducting for you, Abingdon."

This represented about half the income which Tirebuck drew from journalism, and he was the last man to adapt himself to a loss of income, however temporarily, because he lived so extravagantly.

Even Abingdon was taken aback. "Do you mean this seriously, Tirebuck?" he asked.

"Did you ever know me take a stand without sticking to it?"

"Never; it's the most respectable thing about you."

"Thanks. Well, I'm not going to budge from it now."

"Your sense of dignity is injured, I suppose, by my having to refuse you when you make a point of it."

"I don't deny that I am intensely annoyed; but that is not why I have resigned."

"Why do you resign then?"

"In order to offer my services to another editor."

"Have you decided what editor?"

"No."

"And you will ask him to take this lady on his staff?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And suppose he refuses?"

"He won't get the chance."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I shall go to Hastings, who acts as my literary agent, and shall give him a bound volume of your paper, and ask him to find another paper to take my work at the same salary as you have given me, plus ten per cent. for his commission."

"I don't see how that will help your lady."

There was anger in Tirebuck's voice as he replied, for he disliked the expression "your lady"; he considered it underbred in Abingdon.

"You must let me finish. He is further to stipulate that I am to have an assistant at a salary of two pounds a week, to be appointed by myself."

"And do you suppose that any editor will consent to such an extraordinary stipulation?"

"I have staked half my professional income on it."

"Well, let me hear how you get on," said Abingdon genially.

"You may be quite sure that I shall not. We shall never meet again, Abingdon, because you don't go out, and I can never come here. I shan't forget that for some years I have enjoyed the friendship of so great a man, but I must wish you good-bye"—as he spoke he held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Tirebuck. Don't let it be for good; come and have lunch with me sometimes—quite alone."

Tirebuck shook his head sadly, and went out.

Abingdon had half made up his mind to write to Tirebuck, saying that he would reconsider his refusal, when, in turning over his file of morning papers, he saw in every one of them a column advertisement of the new department which was to be opened in the *Morning Gazette*, edited by Mr. Reginald Tirebuck, heretofore connected in a similar capacity with *The Carlton*.

He had a fit of strong language, which made his wife nervous about his health.

CHAPTER XVIII

REGINALD TIREBUCK, KNIGHT ERRANT

IT was about ten o'clock at night and Lesley was sitting in her pantry, tired out. Her feet were not quite cured yet, and she found the standing about, which a parlourmaid's work entails, trying, towards the end of the day.

Suddenly there was the alarum of an electric bell. She put her head out into the passage and looked at the board. It was the front door bell. Straightening her cap, which she had pushed back to relieve her headache, she went to answer it. There at the door stood Tirebuck, in evening dress and a fur-lined coat, with his opera-hat folded under his arm.

"Good evening, Miss Brydges," he said.

"Oh, why have you come again?" cried Lesley. "You must have known how I should hate it! You could have written just as well."

"I'm sorry," said Tirebuck penitently. "But really I have some news for you."

"And please don't call me Miss Brydges—I am Brydges here."

Tirebuck was a little hurt at his reception after he had risked so much to find an opening in journalism for her, but he noted with compunction how tired she was looking, and he guessed that her nerves were playing her false,

"Well, Brydges," he said gravely, as he would have spoken to a petulant child, "will you ask your mistress if I may speak to her for a few minutes?"

Lesley looked at him with startled eyes. Then she said, "Yes, I will ask her. Will you wait here, please?"

There was a tall old Stuart chair, too large to move, by the hall table; he sat down in it. In the minute that he was kept waiting, he noticed how beautifully the hall was kept; that was Lesley's work, of course, done with scrupulous care, because she was a lady. He wondered what she really felt about her duties, whether they were congenial or whether she hated them. Manlike, he argued with himself that, whether they were congenial or not, they were unsuited for her; he considered that it would have been different if it were her own home, and she were not paid to do it.

When Mrs. Andrewes glanced at the card on Lesley's tray she said, "Ask him to come in."

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as the girl left the room she said, "Slip out when I have introduced you, Lance. He's one of her people."

Mrs. Andrewes rose to shake hands with Tirebuck as he entered the room; she introduced her husband. The men shook hands, and Lance Andrewes said, "Let me take your coat and hat." Tirebuck did not refuse; he reflected that it would give him time if Lesley wanted to dismiss him briefly, when Mrs. Andrewes left them together. He had begun to doubt whether, after all, Lesley would be pleased with the step he had taken.

"I suppose you've come to rob me of my domestic peace," smiled Mrs. Andrewes.

"That depends on what you mean by the expression."

"You have come to tell me that I am to lose Miss Brydges, and I never had such a treasure of a parlour-maid."

"I hope to succeed in that," he said.

"I hope you will, much as we shall hate losing her;

she ought not to be here. But what have you found for her to do?"

"I have found a position for her in a newspaper office under my own eye. Ordinarily speaking, she will be in the correspondence room, where there are several other ladies employed in attending to the letters which arise out of my work, upon which the Editor hopes to found a considerable advertising business. And sometimes she will have to go in my place where I cannot attend to a matter myself."

"What sort of a matter is it likely to be? Could she do it? I know that you would not send her where she would meet with any disagreeables; I am not alluding to that. But has she sufficient training for the post?"

"She will have when I have trained her; I should have to train whomever I had under me to be 'my eyes,' when I cannot go myself."

"What sort of work is it?"

"Oh, it's a subject that Miss Brydges knows something about: her father was a great collector, and her home was full of beautiful things. I have undertaken the Department of Art-Sales for the *Morning Gazette*, and she is to be my assistant."

"May I ask how you obtained the appointment for her?"

Reginald Tirebuck hesitated. He did not wish to have his resignation from the staff of *The Carlton* connected with Lesley Brydges: it sounded too romantic. Then a *via media* presented itself to him.

"I am allowed to select my own assistant," he said. "Otherwise I would not have undertaken the work; so much depends on one's assistant, and Miss Brydges is not only intelligent, but, as I say, she has considerable knowledge of the matter."

This was strictly true, though it was not the truth.

"It was very kind of you to think of her: there must have been other people to whom you wanted to give the place."

"There was no one to whom I would rather

have given it." He spoke with assurance now: he was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"And when is she to begin?"

"On Monday—if she will come, and you can spare her. I'll get my secretary, whom I pay by the piece, when I want one, to do her work till she is ready. Can I speak to her about it?"

"Of course; I'll call her." She imagined that Tirebuck was Lesley's lover, and she did not wish to hurt his feelings by ringing for her as a servant. He was not in love with Lesley at all, but Mrs. Andrewes was right in a way, nevertheless. Anything which recalled the fact that Lesley was a servant did lacerate, not his feelings, but his self-esteem; Lesley was one of his friends.

As she was going out of the room, an idea struck Mrs. Andrewes; she turned with her hand on the door. "But what about your work on *The Carlton*, Mr. Tirebuck?" she asked. "Are you giving that up entirely?"

Tirebuck turned a guilty red. "I shall not have time for them both," he said.

"But it is the same work that you were doing for *The Carlton*, isn't it? Directly I mentioned your name to my husband he knew who you were, though it did not occur to me when I saw your card. We have always read your articles with great pleasure."

"You are very kind," said Tirebuck with a certain stiffness, which precluded all further questioning. "I am merely transfering from one paper to the other."

Mrs. Andrewes looked at him keenly. "Miss Brydges has a great deal to thank you for," she said. There was a little smile on her lips as she opened the door to fetch Lesley.

She did not return; Lesley came into the drawing-room by herself.

She greeted Tirebuck with her old frank smile. "You must think me the most perverse person in the world," she said, holding out her hand, "but you startled me just now; I did not expect to see you again so soon."

"It was nothing," said Tirebuck in his most formal manner, though he was greatly relieved to find that Lesley was in an amenable mood. He had had little experience with women: their minds were a sealed book to him. He had a vast number of women-acquaintances, but no friends of the opposite sex; nor had he ever been really intimate with one of them.

"I think I have found a chance for you to get back again into journalism. The pay is not good, only two pounds a week; but it is certain for a year at least." He did not explain how. "And, when you have held this post for a year, you will have had experience, and I shall be able to find you a much better engagement, and get someone else to be my assistant."

"Two pounds a week," she repeated mechanically. The amount brought back the memory of the old easy times, when she was copying documents at the Colonial Office for Major Waugh.

"Two pounds a week to start with! It sounds too good to be true. Tell me about this wonderful place, Mr. Tirebuck."

As he told her, he could see her eyes glistening. No more menial work to make her hands red! She glanced at them, and Tirebuck, following her eyes, read her thoughts. No more days without going outside the house except to post a letter! No more days spent in getting rooms ready for other people to eat and think and talk and sleep in! No more days without one intellectual note in them except the half hour's reading of books, lent to her by Mrs. Andrewes, which she tried to squeeze in before bedtime, after she had finished her washing-up.

Journalism with all its excitements and its possibilities once more! She knew what a hard taskmistress journalism can be, with its constant working against time, its crisis every day, but she knew that it spelt freedom and movement. She visualized Fleet Street, always beloved of her heart, with its lettered window panes and its shrieking advertisements, with its congested traffic, with its Law

Courts and St. Clement's House (from which women defy the Courts) at its head, and St. Paul's great dome crowning Ludgate Hill at its foot. And she realized the fullness of the life she might lead both in her work, and out of it!

Then she came down to earth again; she could not leave Mrs. Andrewes without giving her a month's notice; it would be impossible after her kindness. And in that month of course the place would be filled up—so she would not get her freedom after all. "I am afraid that it is impossible, Mr. Tirebuck," she said.

"Why?" He hated to be crossed at any time; and he liked it least of all now, when he had changed his principal post, the most interesting and reputation-bringing of all his posts, for her, and severed his connection with the famous and brilliant Abingdon.

"Because I shall have to give a month's notice, and of course this place will be filled up at once."

"Not at all. I shall have to assume my duties at once, I admit, but there's no reason why I should engage a permanent assistant, or any assistant, until I choose. They give me one, but they don't force me to take one."

"Then it's true that you are leaving the office of *The Carlton?*"

"Yes," he answered, rather taken aback. "How did you hear of it?"

"I saw it in the *Morning Gazette*, when I was laying the fire in the dining-room to-day."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Tirebuck, partly in annoyance that she should have seen the notice, partly in disgust at the idea of her laying the fire; his mind was incapable of rising superior to the derogatoriness of such work.

"Did you do this to create a place for me?"

"Yes," said Tirebuck, bluntly, "I did." He had hoped that Lesley would not question him on this point. It never occurred to him to lie about it; he explained that, when he could not get any of his editors to give her work, he had hazarded this, his principal post, the one

where he counted most. "There was no real risk," he added. "Abingdon thought I was bluffing, but the first of the great Dailies, to whom Hastings offered my work, accepted the terms."

"What made you do it?" said Lesley, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the step he had taken. It seemed incredible that Tirebuck, that cold remote personality, who had let the years, in which she had been working in London, slip by without any effort to help her beyond that introduction given so long ago in Rome, should have been moved to make such an upheaval in his life just for her.

He looked at her whimsically. The years seemed to have left no mark on his fair fresh colouring; for the moment he forgot his mannerisms, and, letting his eyeglass fall from his eye, he passed his hand over his smooth shining hair. He looked like a puzzled boy, and, in fact, he was on the verge of a brown study over the extraordinariness of it all. That he, a confirmed bachelor, should have made this violent change in his life for a girl, who was nothing to him but an acquaintance! He was not in the least in love with her—he was quite sure that he was incapable of falling in love—or this might have furnished an explanation. The whole thing was an offering on the altar of friendship, for a person who had not yet attained the distinction of being his friend. It did not occur to him that it was a sacrifice to outraged conventionality.

He gave a worried smile, "I don't know," he said, slowly, "except that I wanted to help."

His hesitation was so natural, and his whole attitude was so free from complacency or the slightest hint of patronizing, that, for the first time since she had known him, Lesley felt that she really liked Reginald Tirebuck. Never had so great a gift been offered with such diffidence and natural tact.

"Then I shall be letting you down badly, if I don't take it?"

"Well, you will."

"Of course I will take it, if it can wait a month for

me. And thank you a thousand times," she cried, swept away by a flood of feeling, "for all your generosity and self-sacrifice in doing this for me!"

"It is nothing," said Tirebuck, and really meant it. "Do you think you will like the work itself?" he asked.

"You know that this sort of journalism was my ambition when I came to London? I soon grew to look upon my work for poor Major Waugh as a farce, though I believe he bequeathed it to the Australian Public Library: I wanted to be doing something real."

Tirebuck was gratified. But he only said with stiff politeness, "I am glad that you are pleased with what I have done."

"But how will you manage for the month?"

"Oh, it will be rather a good thing than otherwise, because I shall get Roberts, the man I engage from a secretarial bureau, when I want assistance of this sort, to come along and put the thing into working order. He has great experience, especially in handling the people in a newspaper office."

"Can you really do this?"

"Of course I can, or I shouldn't have come."

"You don't know how gratefully I accept the position," said Lesley warmly, "and I will tell Mrs. Andrewes to-night that I am leaving her."

"Shouldn't we tell her now, while I am here, so that if she has any questions to ask I can answer them?"

"Yes, I'll go and tell her now. I would rather speak to her alone, if you will wait a few minutes."

He sat down when she had left the room and took out his cigarette-case absent-mindedly. He was immensely relieved that Lesley had accepted the situation so naturally, and had not pestered him with questions about his resignation. "She must be a very sensible person," he remarked to himself. He devoutly hoped that Mrs. Andrewes would not say anything to mar his plans; he recognized that, from her point of view, the whole affair must seem very strange.

He was roused from his reverie by hearing a pleasant

voice say: "Lance, go and offer Mr. Tirebuck a whisky and soda; we shan't keep him long."

Lance put his head in at the door. "Come into the dining-room and have a drink; won't you, Mr. Tirebuck?"

"No, thanks very much." Though he was a small drinker, he was too great a connoisseur in whisky to take any unless it was one of his favourite brands, and he could not ask Mr. Andrewes plump out what the brand was.

Meanwhile Lesley, standing just inside the door of Mrs. Andrewes' bedroom, in the same respectful attitude as if she had answered the bell, was telling her news.

"How very kind of him it is," said Mrs. Andrewes; "it's so much nicer than I should have expected from such a well-dressed man!"

Lesley laughed in spite of herself. "I know what you mean," she said. "I've never felt at home with him before."

"Perhaps that's a good thing, as you're going to work with him," said Mrs. Andrewes, plainly. "But about the month's notice, Miss Brydges. This is really an exceptional case, and I don't want to stand out for my notice. It will do quite well if you just stay with me till I can get the charwoman, who always comes to me when I am short of a servant."

"Thank you very much indeed, but I'm sure that there is no necessity for me to go before the month is up."

"That's very nice, if it's true. Now, Miss Brydges, before we go back to the drawing-room, is everything all right. Of course we all know Reginald Tirebuck by name, but, on the face of things, one would be disposed to distrust such a grandly got-up young man, who arrives at ten o'clock at night to offer a girl like you work in a newspaper office, where she will be, more or less, as I understand, at his beck and call."

"Oh, yes," said Lesley, with her little smile. "He is quite all right; he knew my father, and knows my chief friends in London, and"—she had no words for it in the conventional language of a servant, she had to go to slang—"he is a regular Mr. Grundy."

"Indeed? I'm glad to hear it; one is thankful for the existence of Mr. and Mrs. Grundy nowadays."

As Lesley was holding the dining-room door open for her mistress to pass in, Mrs. Andrewes slipped her arm round the girl's waist, and kept it there when she had drawn Lesley into the room: she wished Tirebuck to see the estimation in which she held her.

"Miss Brydges has told me that she accepts your offer most gratefully, Mr. Tirebuck. Are you quite sure that waiting a month won't inconvenience you?"

"I should prefer it," he said, with his stiff politeness. But she could see that he really meant it.

"Then that is settled. Miss Brydges will be ready to come to your office to-day month."

"Thank you," he said, "that will do nicely. Good-night."

Lesley disengaged herself, and went to open the front door for him. Mrs. Andrewes was on the verge of calling out to her husband to go and do it, when she reflected that Tirebuck might have something private to say to Lesley. She could not resist watching them down the passage to the door; she wished to see if he would shake hands with Lesley.

He did. But the only thing he said was, "Good-night."

"What an automaton!" sighed Mrs. Andrewes.

"Do you want me for anything else, ma'am?"

"No," said Mrs. Andrewes. She had a good deal to say to her husband.

CHAPTER XIX

LESLEY AT THE "MORNING GAZETTE"

LESLEY took a good deal of pains with her personal appearance for her first day at the office with Tirebuck: but he did not turn up at all.

She had plenty to do, however, for the temporary secretary, who had been getting the work into shape for her, a very experienced journalist, was there to hand over the papers to her, and to explain what her duties consisted of. They lay principally in the direction of running through all the newspapers, which came to the office, for advertisements of forthcoming sales, and accounts of interesting houses, curios and furniture which had changed hands. She was to take cognizance alike of the great public sales at Christie's and Puttick's, and of individual items of interest. These had to be mounted in albums and indexed day by day, and a diary had to be prepared of coming events which Tirebuck might like to attend or send her to attend. It was the first time that anything of the kind had been attempted in a daily newspaper, and the advertising manager hoped for great results from it.

Lesley at first felt rather snubbed that she had no writing—no composition of articles to do whatever—that she had only to scissor out and paste in, and make entries. But this was succeeded by a feeling of relief, because she had never written an article in her life, and wondered

however she could write up to the standard of a fastidious and complaining person like Tirebuck.

He did not turn up for two or three days, in fact till he wanted the copy for his weekly half-page; and, when he came, though he shook hands with her respectfully and cordially, he was impersonal and business-like. He did not fail to observe, however, that she was neat and lady-like in her costume, the one respectable tailor-made suit which she had preserved, when she sold all her personal belongings in the previous winter.

Tirebuck stayed and worked with her for two or three hours: she admired the way in which he sucked her brains: in her anxiety to seem grateful she had digested the whole mass of facts and was a living index to them. He was not long in discovering this, and proceeded to make use of it; he made his article a record of the principal events of the past week and a programme of the coming week, illuminated by his unique knowledge of former sales and of the notable pictures, china and so on, which were mentioned in his columns. It was a splendid piece of journalism bristling with facts, embellished with brilliant comment.

Lesley did not mind his absence of interest in her; she was glad that she was able to do the work, and be of use to him.

He wrote the article in one of the Departmental Editor's rooms with glass walls, which opened off the large room where she generally worked; they were a feature of the *Morning Gazette* on which many women were employed. The glass shut off the voices and—prevented waste of time. There was a large table in the centre on which Lesley spread out all the materials before she sat down opposite him to answer questions. Here and there he asked one: she answered it intelligently and relapsed into silence. He sat on working for three or four hours, speaking little—she had anticipated his wants; and, before he got up, he had finished his entire contribution for the week.

Then he shook hands with her formally without making any allusion as to when they were to meet again, though

he put on his gloves, and buttoned them, and brushed his hat before he left the room.

Lesley was stung; she felt that she must make him speak.

"Am I doing it right?" she asked.

"Quite right: you have done it very well indeed: I knew you would do it well, of course," answered Tirebuck with just a glimmer of his old friendliness. Then he relapsed into his official manner, "Please go on as you have begun."

It was not his habit to mix up social and official relations, and he meant to be particularly careful not to give people in the office any handle for gossip about him and Lesley, as he had been instrumental in getting her the post. Lesley was thankful for his impersonal attitude to her over the work, but she could not help feeling a little hurt, because he showed so little interest in her as a friend. She did not realize to what an extent he worshipped Mrs. Grundy; she thought that it must be that he was ashamed to be seen going about with her because she was not smartly dressed. Or perhaps he feared that, if they met on terms of equality outside the office, she would assume an air, which he disliked, within it.

As a matter of fact, though he was influenced by what the staff of the *Morning Gazette* might think if he was seen taking his assistant about with him, Tirebuck's actions were controlled by another set of emotions. The truth was that he was afraid of falling in love; no matter how much he reasoned with himself, Tirebuck was conscious that, for the first time in his life, he saw the desirability of a woman. "It's ridiculous to fall in love," he argued with himself, "because I've done an action which most men would consider a proof of being in love. Certainly I was not in love when I did it." Which was true, but not very comforting.

On the following Thursday he did not even let her stay in the glass room with him; he asked a few questions about the copy before he sat down, and then said, "I'm sure that I need not keep you, everything is clear; if

I should want to know anything, I can easily come out to you, and you may just as well be getting on with the work."

Occasionally they attended sales together, but Tirebuck preserved his official attitude, and, though he always sent her home or to the office, as the case might be, in a taxi, which was entered to his private account, he never offered her tea, or showed by any sign that he remembered their old friendship.

Lesley could hardly believe that she had ever done anything so frivolous as to dine and dance with this immaculate young man : she felt a little sore at his treatment, but shrugged her shoulders over it : she did not intend to make herself unhappy about it, though she would have appreciated his companionship.

One day, as she was coming down the wide staircase of the office and passing the Editorial rooms, which were on the first floor, the Editor-in-chief came out accompanied, of all people in the world, by Mark Aylmer.

She did not see them, but Mark called out to her, " Lesley, Lesley, aren't you going to speak to me ? "

Lesley beamed with honest pleasure, and advanced to shake hands.

" Mark ! What a stranger you are ! I'd no idea that you and Marian were back in England again ! "

" We've not been back long, and, funnily enough, Marian was saying only yesterday that she must ring you up. But what are you doing here ? "

" I'm on the staff, in a very minor capacity."

" Strawberry," said Mark to the editor, who was standing in an attitude of polite attention ; he was entirely ignorant who Lesley was ; he had never seen her before. " Why didn't you tell me that you had Miss Brydges in your office ? She's a great friend of my wife's."

Mr. Van Straubenzee was a jolly-looking little man, as red as a turkey-cock, who screwed his face up round an eyeglass. He was profoundly interested in sport of all kinds—as a looker-on. He made a point of being present at every prominent event in the sporting world, no matter

whether it was football or golf, horse-racing or cricket, a boat race, a prize fight, or a racquet championship: he patronized tennis of both sorts. The result was that he had such an understanding of the man in the street that his paper became *the* family newspaper. He had a weakness for being seen about with well-known sporting men, and he especially favoured Mark Aylmer because he was the chief sporting light of the Carlton Club—the *Morning Gazette* was severely Conservative. Mr. Van Straubenzee cultivated "spats" as other men cultivate orchids.

Had he realized that Lesley was the innocent cause of his securing Reginald Tirebuck, upon whom he had so long had an eye, for his paper, it might have added animation to the pleasantness, with which he received her as a pretty woman, who was a friend of Mark Aylmer's. But she was not on the general staff, so he really had not realized her existence. He asked her to take a cup of tea with them, which she refused—so little attention did she pay to the main chance—and, after Mark had extorted her address, she left them.

Unwittingly she did the wisest thing she could do, for Mark Aylmer was sincerely attached to her, and he was the loyallest of friends.

"Look here, Strawberry," he said. "You've got to wake up, and do something for that little girl!"

Mr. Van Straubenzee, who was one of the most wide-awake editors in London, always looked half asleep.

"Well, I'll see what can be done."

"I shan't leave you any peace till you do."

"I must find out what she does."

"She's Reggie Tirebuck's assistant: she told me."

"Oh, that's why I know nothing about her: he made it a condition that he should appoint his own assistant. I suppose that was what he quarrelled with Abingdon about; I'll look into it."

With that the subject dropped, and the two men took a hurried cup of tea, and taxi'd over to see Inman in a big billiard match.

Lesley did hesitate for just a second before she declined

the tea. It seemed a little foolish to refuse to meet your editor, but she had promised Mary Strange to go house-hunting in Fulham and Chelsea, for they were bent on finding a little old-fashioned nest for themselves in a derelict street of an unfashionable suburb.

When Lesley left Mrs. Andrewes, she went first to the Buckingham Palace Club, to give herself time to look round for some rooms, which would be more congenial than the dreary lodgings in Mimosa Road, where she had lived with Mary. She wrote to Mary to tell her of the great news directly she had it from Tirebuck, and the girls agreed to go into rooms together again. It seemed that fortune was on the upward turn for both of them, for Mary too had a piece of news.

One day while she was working in the tea-rooms off Bond Street, where she was employed, two artists, who had been delayed past their usual tea-hour, in one of the Bond Street galleries, drifted in. Mary took their order.

"China tea for two and buttered toast," said the older man. But directly Mary turned away, he leaned across the table and clutched his companion's arm, "My God! ffolliott, did you notice that girl?"

"No," snapped his friend, "I did not!"

"But, my dear fellow, she's a perfect type; she's the model I've been looking-for for months; she's the central figure in my next year's Academy picture; she's—she's——" words failed him in his excitement—"she's It!"

"Damn your perfect type!" said ffolliott, fixing his gold pince-nez on the bridge of his nose, and taking up the menu, "she's made you order buttered toast, and you know quite well that I always take scones!"

Montague Prendergast put back his head and gave way to a shout of laughter, which made people sitting at the other tables turn round to stare. He was still laughing when Mary came back with the two little pots of tea and the ill-fated buttered toast: he sobered down then, and asked her if she would mind bringing them a plate of scones.

"My friend here doesn't like toast," he said gravely, though his eyes twinkled at her.

"Shall I take back one of the 'toasts'?" asked Mary with her charming air of deference.

The great painter shook his head. "No," he said, "I ordered them and I'll eat them. And if they're as good as they look, I'll order two more: buttered toast's one of my vices!"

It was impossible to resist his charm of manner, and the smile with which he took her into his confidence: Mary returned it fearlessly.

ffolliott got no more words out of his friend for the next half-hour; Prendergast was deep in thought. How should he ask that girl to sit for his next picture, the great allegory which was to make such a sensation when it was exhibited in the summer? She was obviously a lady, and somehow that made it more difficult to approach the subject; he felt instinctively that she would resent any attempts at conversation on his part, in spite of the wonderful smile she had given him. Suddenly he rose, without a word, and strode over to an alcove in the corner of the room where a woman, who was evidently the manageress of the tea-rooms, sat at a folding desk. ffolliott stared after him in amazement.

"I think these tea-rooms belong to you, Madam?" said Prendergast, with his disarming smile.

The lady rose from her chair. "Yes," she said, "and they are honoured by your presence in them, Mr. Prendergast."

"You know me then?"

"Very well by sight, and of course by reputation."

"You flatter me. But for once I am grateful to publicity, since it makes my task easier; you have a young lady here—she brought me my tea just now—I am going to be very presumptuous and ask a great favour of you. Will you use any influence you have to induce her to sit for me as a model? I know I am asking a great deal, but you will earn my eternal gratitude if you will help me: she is the living inspiration of the picture I am at work upon!"

Miss Worthing hesitated. "I don't know how to answer

you," she said at last. "I'm very gratified that you have come straight to me instead of speaking to Miss Strange on the subject. Few people show the same consideration, and one's best waitresses are always being taken away by people who think their real *métier* is Musical Comedy, or the Stage, or what not."

"But however good a waitress she is, there must be hundreds of women to take her place, and I have never seen another girl with such a genius for appearance!"

"She is a splendid waitress," conceded Miss Worthing, "but it was not that which made me hesitate. To be quite candid, I feel that my duty to posterity is to do as you wish, only—Miss Strange is not quite like the other girls; I am afraid that she might resent it."

Just at that moment Mary passed down the room. "Heavens!" said Prendergast under his breath, "what a picture I could make of her!"

"Miss Strange!" called the manageress, fired by his enthusiasm. She was artist enough to see Mary's possibilities, and she knew Prendergast's reputation as a man of integrity. Besides, it was so obviously the artist, and not the man, who was attracted.

Mary came up to the desk; she looked questioningly first at Miss Worthing and then at Prendergast.

"Miss Strange," said the manageress, "this gentleman is Mr. Montague Prendergast. I daresay you know him well enough by name, and from the illustrated papers, to need no explanation as to who he is."

Montague Prendergast held out his hand. "I hope you will forgive me, Miss Strange, for forcing myself upon you like this; but I could think of no other way of approaching you without giving offence."

Mary took his hand; his notorious charm of manner had carried him through more difficult situations than this; the shyest of children took him into their confidence.

"Why do you wish to know me?" she asked simply.

"I want you to do me a great favour—to give up your work here, for the present, at anyrate"—as

he spoke he turned to Miss Worthing as if to seek her consent—"and sit to me for the central figure in the picture I am working at for next season's exhibition at Burlington House. You are the type I have been searching through the 'School' to find for the last two months—without success."

Mary hesitated.

"You will understand," said Prendergast, "that I am not asking you to give up your present work for an uncertainty; I am willing to engage you for the next four months, probably five, at the usual model rates, whether you are actually coming to me every day or not; and, at the end of that time, I will either find you other work in the studios, or, if you should prefer it, another post similar to the one you are filling now."

"You are very kind," said Mary, to whom it seemed as if the gates of Paradise were opening. No one, who has not starved for it, knows what exultation it is to see the golden gates of the Temple of Beauty rolled back for the devotee to enter—the devotee who has for years been forced to walk blindfold in narrow byeways of the commonplace, seeking to earn her bread in the sordid surroundings of a great city. "But I have never been a model; perhaps I should not be much use to you."

"My dear Miss Strange, you need not be afraid because you have no experience; it is you yourself that is the inspiration, the fact of your existence—your being what you are."

Mary lifted her head, and looked the great man straight in the eyes. "If I can be of any use, I will gladly come," she said.

"Thank you," said Prendergast, holding out his hand, impulsively, as if they had just struck a bargain. "When may we begin?" he demanded eagerly of Miss Worthing.

That lady laughed and shook her head. "Not before next Monday, Mr. Prendergast," she said, "we are very busy as it is."

"Monday then!" He took out a card and gave it

to Mary. "That is my address," he said. On it was engraved:

> "Mr. Montague Prendergast,
> "Phillimore Lodge,
> "Campden Hill,
> "Kensington, W.
> "The Arts Club."

He shook hands with both women again, and strode out of the shop.

ffolliott, who had been sitting all this while at the table, shrugged his thin shoulders; he made a signal to Mary, and paid for his own and Prendergast's tea.

Mary made a little exclamation: "Oh, he has forgotten his hat!"

"*And* the bill for his tea!" said ffolliott dryly, folding the soft felt hat into a roll, which he stuffed into his pistol pocket. "One day he will forget his head!"

* * * * * *

As both the girls were settled in regular work which was more remunerative, in Mary's case at least, than any which they had had before, they determined to select their rooms with care. They could have afforded to live at the Buckingham Palace Club, but they did not wish to. The unhomeliness of the place depressed them, and the sight of all those other women, the most successful of them earning from two to three pounds a week, or very occasionally half a sovereign more, and living such dreary lives, only served to remind them of the end they must inevitably reach themselves.

"Let us have a home of our own as nearly as possible," said Mary. "It saddens me to see all those other women, going out to their work in the morning and coming in again at night to their empty evenings; no matter how courageous they are, they seem to me like women in prison.

Some of them are almost at the end of their tether: they have been saving and scraping together all their lives to put by enough to live-on, when they are thrown out of work. Some of them have succeeded, it is true, but others, to whom the years have been more unkind, know that before long they will be called upon to face the direst poverty. And even the more successful do not give me courage; for their lives are so joyless that I feel that, however successful I may be, it will be only the pouring of riches into a well, the emptying of water into a reed basket. No, let us be happy in our little spell of prosperity, and forget the lean years that are to come after."

"But there will be no more lean years for either of us," said Lesley happily: her heart was light in these days: the old feeling of security was coming back, as her friends gathered round her once more. Mary had been too long in the shadows to believe that her sunshine would last.

"Unless the gods and your St. Anthony are very watchful, there will come lean years for both of us," she said, rather sadly; in her heart she knew too well that the honour and glory of a working and independent womanhood were dust and ashes to her.

"This very day will I burn a candle to St. Anthony," said Lesley, laughing: "he gave me back my courage, and now he has given me my friends."

Mary smiled, though she shook her head.

"Burn one for me," she said.

"What shall I ask him to give you back?"

"My dreams," said Mary. And she was not speaking of the Colonies.

CHAPTER XX

MADAME SORREL FROM TAROBERT'S

THE first extravagance to which Lesley gave way, when the help of Tirebuck restored to her a modicum of financial ease, was to start a subscription at Mudie's: she had been pining for books. There were other libraries nearer to her work than the Kensington High Street Mudie, but she had heard of Mudie's all her life, and Marian Aylmer advised her to go to the Kensington Branch. One day, when she had a few hours to spare at the *Morning Gazette* office, she took the omnibus, as directed, to High Street Station, and, crossing the road to Chesterton's corner, found herself passing some windows with wonderful model-dresses in them. Across each window was written in gold letters, which imitated handwriting, "Madame Sorrel from Tarobert's." Wondering if Sorrel could be any of the girls whom she had met when she used to go to Tarobert's to see Agnes, as well as fascinated by the frocks, and, being her own mistress as regards time, Lesley tripped into Sorrel's.

She inquired for Madame Sorrel. Madame Sorrel was in one of the dressing-rooms fitting a customer. Lesley sat down to wait for her, turning over in her mind what she should ask for, if Madame Sorrel proved to be a stranger.

Presently Madame came out. The girl who had spoken to Lesley said something to her, and pointed out the customer, in not very promising clothes, with a deprecating

glance. Madame, not recognizing Lesley for the moment, came across to her with a diffident but gracious smile. Then she paused, and hesitated, but there was no hesitation on Lesley's part; one glance sufficed to reveal the identity of Madame Sorrel, and with a little cry of "Agnes! My dear, why ever didn't you tell me?" she was in Agnes's arms.

When the excitement of their greeting had subsided, Agnes asked, "Have you had lunch, Lesley?"

"No, I was on my way there now; I have a wonderful shilling lunch at the 'Roma,' an Italian place off the Strand, where I can have anything I want for my money, because I talk to the *padrone* and the waiters in the Roman dialect."

"Come upstairs and share my sole; it will give us the chance of talk. I have a little flat over the shop—only four rooms—but it gives me somewhere to sleep if I am detained, or want to spend a few days in town."

"Do you live in the country, then?"

"Very mild country, on the banks of the Thames before you get to Hampton Court. But I'll tell you all about it at lunch; I have a few things to see-to, before I go upstairs. Marguerite, my dear," she said, addressing one of her assistants, "would you blow up to Mrs. Hichens, and ask her to lay lunch for two.

"Lunch first, confidences over a cigarette," she said as Mrs. Hichens retired to her kitchen to grill a steak. "In other words, you shall tell me about your doings, while my faithful Hichens is dodging in and out, and I will tell you about mine, which I don't wish to percolate to the shop, when we are sure of being undisturbed.

"My poor child!" cried Agnes, as Lesley unfolded her tale of woe. "And to think that, all the time you were wearing your health out at Hobury's and your soul at Mother Skinner's, you might have been here, my favourite and inestimable model, and my bosom friend! You don't want to give up this Tirebuck now, do you?"

"No," said Lesley, "he's been too kind to me. Besides I like the work awfully, and it doesn't cut you off from your friends like business does. I don't mean

that in a snobby way, you know, dear," she added quickly, "but because you are more or less free to come and go during the daytime instead of being tied to your shop, or your office, or whatever it is."

"I know though it's true either way; I know that better than you. But I have no friends and I want none, except people like you and Mary, so it does not matter."

"Are you very unhappy?" asked Lesley, when they were left to their coffee and cigarettes.

"No, indeed. I'm as happy as the day is long!"

"How splendid of you."

"You see, it's such a relief to be away from Dolly, to be through with it all, and free, and myself again!"

"But you used to love him so much."

"Our love wore out. And then he tried to poison my self-respect; he asked other women to stay with us—you know what for—and expected me to treat them as guests. I tried to be civil to them because I was so sorry for them, but the situation was an impossible one."

"Did you leave him?"

"No. It wasn't easy to wrench myself from such a commanding personality as Dolly, especially when he had meant so much to me—that's a woman's way I suppose. But I was desperately miserable; the whole thing was so degrading. I had almost screwed my courage to the breaking point, when he relieved me of the necessity by announcing, as calmly as if he was talking about going away for a week-end, 'Six months from to-day my cousin comes of age, so I shall have to give up this establishment, and send my lawyers to Sir Hedworth's.'

"Sir Hedworth had no son. Dolly was heir to the title and the estates, and since then he has come in for them. He told me in the blankest way that his uncle had large property unentailed, and that his cousin was being made to marry him to keep the property together."

"What did you say?"

"I said nothing. For a moment I thought I should faint with the shock of it, though I knew that he was to marry his cousin. In spite of all his neglect, and the

shame he had put me to, by bringing other women into the house, it was terrible to think that the end had come—that I was to see no more of the man I had loved so passionately, of that splendidly virile man, who had been mine so completely in the first days of our love. I can't tell you what I felt!" Agnes covered her face with her hands, as though to shut away the memory. Then she threw out her arms with a gesture of freedom. "Don't let's talk about it," she said. "It's over and done with. To each his own little hell! Let's turn these pages of my life over quickly. I suppose that every woman has certain leaves in the book of her life which she will not read to any human being—perhaps the blots and the tears, with which they are sprinkled, render them legible only to her God.

"Dolly's lawyer announced his intention of coming to see me in a week to settle things up: I passed the first few days in weeping, but gradually my senses returned: those months with Dolly—I had only been living with him a year when he first began to bring other women to the flat—had been very wearing with their passion and their heartburnings. I felt as if it would be a relief to forget that there were such things as men for the rest of my life, or at any rate for an indefinite period. I wanted to give more of my mind to my business. I wanted, now that I was comparatively well-off again, to enjoy a garden and a library. You know, I always had a passion for gardening and books, and they both bored Dolly to extinction.

"Though I am comparatively young in years I felt that, in my home life, I wanted to retire, like an old, old woman, to rest and think." She broke off to offer Lesley another cigarette, and added in a lighter tone, "I'm like Barrie's Rosalind—in everything except the carpet slippers—I want to enjoy the pleasures and comforts of middle age!"

"And are you really quite well-off, Agnes?"

"I am quite prosperous; you remember that Dolly gave me four thousand pounds to start a business with

just before I went away with him? Oh, well, I thought I told you that. I left that money untouched while Dolly and I were knocking about enjoying ourselves. Then we came back to settle down,—he must have been still deeply in love with me at that time, for he bought the lease of our flat—a good many years, and furnished it magnificently, though he could not have forgotten the family arrangement about his marriage.

"But I was always afraid of him, and I began to dread the blankness of my life when he got tired of me. Besides, I hated the pussy-cat life, it wasn't big enough, and I wanted something beyond Dolly to give me interests. So I bethought myself of my four thousand pounds, and I procured a list of businesses for sale, and went to Madame Tarobert to ask her to pick out the weak points in the various proposals. Most of them were for sale from the impossibility of getting their accounts paid by aristocratic patrons; the premises were eligible: the clients were of good social standing: the stocks were up to date; but there were no ready-money customers passing through the streets where they were established.

"One, hailing from Kensington High Street, was entirely different to the rest: here there was no stock to be sold and the good-will presented a most modest valuation: the feature of this proposal was that the vendor wanted to get rid of expensive premises and fittings, and take his stock further into the suburbs. Madame Tarobert taxi'd out to the place to see it with me, and, while she was there, kept saying, 'This will do.'

"'Why will it do?' I asked. 'They don't seem to have any business at all.'

"'Wait until you have seen Monsieur Tarobert.'"

"Monsieur Tarobert?" queried Lesley. "Whatever had he to do with it?"

"Money, I suppose. Well, the upshot of it all was that the Taroberts offered to go into partnership with me in establishing a branch of their business in those premises in Kensington High Street. We each put in two thousand five hundred pounds, and I was to have a percentage on

the business, for managing it, before partnership profits were reckoned."

"Then is this place a branch of the Maison Tarobert?"

"It's a separate company. But I have Madame Tarobert's advice as to how much the Kensington prices should range below the Bond Street prices, and her buyers buy for both houses."

"Where do you come in?"

"I have complete discretion in the arrangements I make with individual customers, and I engage and dismiss all the Kensington staff."

"I shouldn't have thought that Kensington would stand the Tarobert models," said Lesley.

"I won't stand them myself," said Agnes; "we have nothing of that kind whatever in my shop."

"How long had you been 'Madame Sorrel from Tarobert's' before the crash came?"

"About seven months."

"Was it getting on quite nicely?"

"Yes."

"I think it was hateful of Dolly to send his lawyer to you!" cried Lesley indignantly.

"He was quite decent; he could not have been more polite if I had been Dolly's wife in the process of divorce; he explained to his own satisfaction that Dolly was the victim of circumstances, and presented me with documents which, he informed me, made me the possessor of the flat for so many years, and the absolute possessor of the furniture. He pointed out the fact that Dolly had signed these documents so that I could go on living where I was until I was tired of it, and could then sell the remainder of the lease, and what furniture I pleased, and spend the money on any place I liked better."

"It was the least he could do!" commented Lesley.

"No," said Agnes, "it was the most he could do! He was trying to be as kind as possible. It's Dolly's misfortune, not his fault, that he is as incapable of being faithful to a woman as he is incapable of being dishonourable in his dealings with a man."

"Have you got the flat still?"

"No, I sold it, and bought an old house on the river a little short of Hampton Court, where I can enjoy my solitude and my flowers."

"Do you go down there every night?"

"Yes: let me motor you and Mary down there to-night to dine and sleep; you could come up with me in the car to-morrow morning."

"I'd rather come and spend a Sunday with you."

"Whichever you like best. What are you going to do this afternoon, Lesley?"

"I'm going to the *Morning Gazette* office."

"Are you obliged to go?"

"Not exactly obliged."

"Can't you spend the afternoon here talking to me in my little den when I'm not wanted; I'm dying to talk to you; that's why I was hoping that you could have come home to-night with me."

Lesley knew that she could stay if she put in a long day's work for the next few days, and, as Agnes wanted her, and she had not seen Agnes for so long, she felt that she could not go back on her. So she yielded.

Business seemed very flourishing; Agnes was hardly ever in her room. But Lesley found a point from which she could see everything in the shop if the door was open, and she drew her chair up to it; she was interested to watch Agnes.

Madame Tarobert had acquiesced in the exclusion of the notorious models from the Kensington Branch, because she considered that Agnes was an advertisement in herself. The ideas she had acquired, while she was secretary at the Maison Tarobert, she had put into practice while Dolly was lavishing money on her, and she was now a singularly elegant woman.

Nor was that all. As Lesley sat watching her through the open door she was fascinated by the diffidence with which Agnes greeted a customer—a diffidence perhaps born of her history, a diffidence which gave way to sureness and clear judgment, when questions of style had to be

settled. The velvety-brown eyes were so innocent and friendly that it was impossible not to trust her. It seemed to Lesley that what Agnes had gone through with Dolly had had the same effect on her as fire has on gold, burning away the alien substances and leaving the pure metal shining.

Agnes had wearied of episodes in the book of love, and the shop reflected it. Not one male set foot in it all the afternoon except Agnes's own employés, though any man's heart might have gone out, as the women-customers' hearts went out, to that frank smile, which had such a curious wistfulness in it. That her mouth was a little large seemed to add to the sincerity of her laughter; and Agnes could laugh with a whole heart.

"And you really enjoy living in the country, Agnes?" asked Lesley, in one of the intervals when Madame Sorrel found herself free to join her friend in the little den, which was her office.

"Yes, it's a delightful old-fashioned house; I should think that it began life as a farm-house. Its last mistress had done what I did. The rich young man, with whom she lived, of course desired privacy and, having motors, welcomed the distance of his cottage from the slow South-Western trains. He was a great boating man, and scooped out a regular harbour in the lawn, which sloped down to the river, to hold his motor yacht and his gondola and a flotilla of boats. And he roofed the harbour over with a sort of Swiss Châlet. Nobody wanted a house so far from everywhere, with its view of the river blocked by this incongruous boat-house, so I was able to buy the place and give it the simple furnishing I needed out of the money I had from selling the lease and furniture of Dolly's flat. You can imagine that I did not wish to go on living there with my memories!"

"How could you stand that boathouse?"

"I didn't: I demurred about it to the agent from whom I was buying the place."

"And what did he say?"

"He said—'It's worth a good bit for the materials. I can sell them for you anyway, and I daresay I can find a purchaser for it as it stands. They're building a lot on Tagg's Island, and I should think that this thing would rather suit them. I'll guarantee that you shall make something out of it, if you put it into my hands."

"And you did?"

"Yes. Tagg's people bought it, and I have been able to turn the harbour into a toy lake without anything like using up the money which I got for it."

"How splendid! But don't you find it rather difficult getting backwards and forwards?"

"I have a car—quite a smart little affair."

"Agnes!" cried Lesley. "I believe you are as extravagant as ever! It used to be silk stockings and evening dresses; now it's motors!"

"It isn't extravagant really. It makes such a good impression on the customers to deliver their orders by private car that the Taroberts let me charge half the expenses to the business."

"Do you live there quite alone?"

"Except for my servants—a cook and a house-parlour-maid, and the chauffeur."

"It sounds heavenly," said Lesley, thinking of the difficulty that she and Mary were having to find rooms they liked at the price, which they could afford to pay. "And I suppose the chauffeur helps you in the garden?"

"No. One of the gardeners at Hampton Court works at my garden after hours, and on his holidays, because I let him live rent free in the quarters which my predecessor built for the engineer of his motor-yacht. It's a great advantage to me to have an experienced man looking round the garden every day, and prescribing what is necessary. I do the rest of the work myself."

While Lesley was sitting with Agnes in her office, a customer came in, quite a young woman. She was stiff and awkward in her movements, and her features were too angular to be pleasing, but she was dignified, and expensively though ineffectively dressed.

"Is it Madame Sorrel?" she said, regarding with evident admiration the beautiful and gracious woman, dressed so simply and yet with such an air of elegance, who came forward to meet her.

"Yes, Madam," said Agnes with her lovely deprecating smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Practically make me a new trousseau, I am afraid. My husband wants you to dress me; he hates all my clothes, and insists on my getting what he calls 'a fresh rig-out.'"

Agnes smiled sympathetically, though she almost gasped at the extensiveness of the order. She made a note of her new client's measurements and promised to have thought out a list of the models, which would be most suitable for her, when she came back on the following morning. She could not stay long now, she said, because she was on her way to a reception.

Agnes picked up a pad to write down the name and address.

"Lady Illington, 98, Carlton House Terrace," said the tall, slim girl.

Agnes stared at her: she could hardly believe her ears.

"Illington is spelt with two 'l's,'" said the girl, who thought that Agnes had not caught the name.

"I'm afraid I can't take the order," said Agnes abruptly.

"But why? I can give you a cheque on account if you require it."

Agnes winced.

"Sir Adolphus himself told me to come here," said Lady Illington.

"How like Dolly!" thought Agnes. "He does think that he can run the whole world without any consideration for decency."

Lady Illington waited until Agnes looked at her again, then she said, "Do be my dressmaker: I have taken such a liking to you."

Lesley, who had overheard the conversation, guessed what a struggle was going on in Agnes's soul. Though she did not for a moment doubt her courage, or the stead-

fastness with which she would guard her secret, she trembled lest by some mischance the truth should reveal itself.

Agnes smiled rather wanly at the woman whom Dolly had married.

"I hope your ladyship will forgive me," she said. "I knew from the papers, of course, that you and Sir Adolphus were only recently married; I thought you would need the gowns in a hurry; and I am very busy."

"I'm glad that's all," said Lady Illington. "I won't hurry you, Madame Sorrel; we shall be in town for some time, and you *will* do your best to make me presentable, won't you?"

The tears leapt into Agnes's eyes. So she had known what it was to feel the lash of Dolly's tongue, already! Her heart felt very pitiful towards this raw and rather ungainly girl, with the clear eyes of a lover of sport, who, she knew well enough, would need all the courage, which was the heritage of her race, to keep her spirit unbroken in the years that were to come.

"You may trust me; I will do my best!" she said warmly.

And Lady Illington went away comforted, with a little glow in her heart at the thought of the transformation which was to take place. She had never cared much for clothes before, and her trousseau, which had been ordered from the best shop in the big town near her home, had seemed well enough up in Yorkshire; but she had been conscious from the beginning that Dolly disapproved of her clothes. She wished that she was as beautiful as Madame Sorrel.

CHAPTER XXI

LETTERS TO PETER FROM COURTESY SQUARE

"7A, Courtesy Square,
"Chelsea, S.W.,
"December 1st, 19—.

"DEAR PETER,

"How you would have laughed if you could have seen us, Mary Strange and myself, tooth-combing Chelsea, from Battersea to Fulham and back again, even to the confines of Kensington, for rooms that were at the same time cheap and desirable. That was the ostensible goal of our pilgrimage, but let me whisper it to you, we were really will-o'-the-wisping after the ideal. And we found it!

"But that is the end of the story! For a fortnight or more we ranged through one cheap neighbourhood after another. We were tempted in Putney, we were tempted in Fulham, we very nearly came to a conclusion in West Kensington, where the rents for furnished flats seemed to us phenomenally cheap; but from the beginning our hearts cried out for Chelsea.

"Every day brought disappointments; each morning dawned greyer than the one before, and, when it did not rain, there were bleak winds that chilled us to the bone as we waited for caretakers to fetch the keys of dreary rooms, which they showed resentfully, eyeing us all the time, up and down, with active suspicion. We were

deliriously uncertain as to what would be at once the cheapest and the most attractive way to live, but, following the lead of the advertisements, we began by looking at furnished flats and furnished maisonettes.

"You have to believe that there are none in the south-west of London letting at under two guineas a week, except in Queen's Court. There we were offered not one but four or five eligible flats, and none of them over twenty-five shillings a week. We had nearly taken all of them, when Reggie Tirebuck sputtered out why we couldn't live there. Can't you picture his confusion?

"Of course there must be cheaper furnished flats, but the world seems to have made up its mind that, if you can't afford two guineas a week, you ought to live in lodgings, which generally mean a virago in the basement, dirty servants who spoil and steal your things, and everything an extra. The virago nearly materialized in a mild and unusual form.

"We were at our wit's end, when one day Mary came back to say that she had actually found rooms with possibilities. The rent was only twelve shillings a week. 'Twelve shillings a week furnished?' I asked. And she answered, 'Partly.'

"I went with her to see them next day. Partly furnished was an admirable description; there were no beds, no washing-stands, no carpets, no anything except a cane table, and a couple of chairs, and a stand for twelve flower-pots. The dining-room certainly took our hearts, for it had been built as a photographer's studio on the leads over the back yard, and it was large and airy. Being a studio the window which took up all one side was so high up that we could see nothing of housebacks and chimneys, but only the sky above them. The landlady was an Irishwoman with woolly red hair and a big woolly dog. She was willing to put in beds, she said, and lay down linoleums and to provide hooks for our clothes. Oh, Peter, be thankful you are not a woman whose dresses look forlorn when they have not been humoured in a wardrobe! But, if she did this, we were

not to bother her about anything else, and we were to give her a written promise to stay the year.

"We had nearly agreed, when she came up to Mary and said in a stage whisper, 'And no followers, young women!' I thought of Ken who would be certain to come and see us, and Mark Aylmer, and Reginald Tirebuck, who, I am sure, would have confirmed her worst suspicions. And I gasped out, 'We have no followers, but we have friends who . . .'

"'I'll have no men in the house!' she interjected.

"'Why not?'

"'This house has always had a good reputation. Besides, I'm terrified of burglars, and you never know!'

"Reggie Tirebuck a burglar! The idea was priceless. So it was not our morals, but her furniture that she was anxious about!

"We conceded the point, because we really liked the rooms. Then Mary said, 'We may have a latch-key, of course?'

"'Latch-key? What do you want with a latch-key?'

"Mary looked to me for support, and I said, 'To go to dances with.'

"'Dances?' she said doubtfully. But here I was firm: dances or not, we couldn't guarantee to be back at a stated time, and, when she saw that we would not give way, she relented.

"'Oh, well, I often go to dances myself, and I shall sit up for you.'

"'Till four?' said I, incredulously.

"'Till four, if need be, young woman,' she answered aggressively.

"We resumed our search, and at last, had resigned ourselves to lodgings in a dear old-fashioned house, where rents were down, because the front looked over a cemetery and the back over a football ground, when we stumbled upon this cottage in Courtesy Square.

"I remember so well the day on which we found it; the sun was shining that morning—the first time for many weeks—and the air was so mild that we almost forgot

that it was November. As we trudged on our quest we passed a little old-fashioned house with a notice on its gate—'James Tew. House Agent.' Everything in sight seemed to have been there for half a century, including James Tew, who must have been left in that place by Dickens.

"He had the air of a family physician rather than a house-agent: he motioned us to seats, and looked at us over the tops of his gold-rimmed spectacles, while we told him our needs. But he had neither flats nor maisonettes, which would suit us. He was very sympathetic, and, as he was showing us out of the door, said, 'I suppose you ladies wouldn't look at a cottage?' Our hearts jumped, and I for one, Peter, felt that I must have bitten a piece of Alice's mushroom and been transported to Wonderland. Whoever heard of a cottage to let in this wilderness of flats!

"'A cottage!' we gasped simultaneously. 'What do you mean by a cottage?'

"'A place that looks like a cottage. It's just at the end of the street. I suppose you wouldn't walk along now and see it?'

"'We should like to very much,' we cried in a breath, not daring to look at each other lest our hopes should be dashed to the ground.

"But, oh, Peter, it was there! A really truly cottage with a little flagged walk leading out of the square to its door between the gardens of other wee houses, and a porch all covered with rusty fragments of creepers and low, old-fashioned windows blinking rather wistfully, as empty houses do, in the November sunshine.

"It was small and tumble-down and shabby. There were only four rooms, and a kitchen as pinched as the scullery of most houses; the handles of all the doors were loose, and none of the windows shut properly. There was no bath-room of course. But it did not matter: there are some places that you love instinctively, just as there are some people whom you love even before you have heard the music of their voices, or turned the pages

of the book of their hearts. Our little house in Courtesy Square was one of these. If the kitchen was small, did not its lean-to roof support the weight of an ancient mulberry-tree which grew in the small back garden, and had wedged an elbow of one of its branches into the tiles, while it lifted its head to peer into the windows of the upper story? If there was no bathroom was there not an old cottage copper with a dip in it worn by years of use; fashioned of real copper, too, which would provide us with hot water enough for baths galore in the nice warm kitchen for a bathroom? And did not our windows look out across the little flagged path, and through the bare branches of the pollard limes which fringed it, to a vista of clipped hedges and dingy trellised porches the whole length of Courtesy Square?

"Then the blow fell. 'But it's not furnished!' exclaimed Mary.

"The old man stared at her. 'No,' he said, and added, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, 'Did you want it furnished?'

"'I'm afraid that it's no good; we can't take the cottage,' said Mary, tumbling down the beanstalk, which had grown up in her imagination, to earth again: 'we have no furniture.'

"'That's a pity,' observed James Tew, 'because the cottage is so cheap.'

"We asked how much, and he said—Oh, Peter, picture it to yourself!—'Twenty-eight pounds a year—with rates and taxes somewhere about thirty-six pounds.'

"Mary and I looked at each other in real distress; it was hard indeed that Fate should snatch away the prize just when our hands were outstretched to take it. Then the unexpected happened. 'How would it be if I furnished it for you?' said this prince of house-agents.

"And then he told us how his house was crammed from the loft to the cellar with furniture, which he had collected at odd times for arrears of rent and one thing and another. 'I'll tell you what,' he said at last. 'If you can provide the carpets I'll furnish the house for you—you can come

and take the pick of what you want; and I'll add five pounds to the rent just for the wear and tear of the things.'

"And he has kept his word; the furniture is as shabby as the cottage, but it's all in the picture. And when I told Marian Aylmer of what we were going to do, she insisted on lending us carpets, old faded Turkey carpets which I am sure will fill Ken's soul with joy, whenever he comes to see us.

"I am writing at my table in the window of my room, which looks along the vista of gardens to the west, where the great elms at the other end of Courtesy Square are silhouetted against the afterglow. Close at hand in my neighbour's garden, which is only separated from our gate by the flagged path, that connects our cottage with the Square, are two slim young poplars which, seen above my muslin blind, brush the sky all day. At night they have a way of grouping themselves against the stars, which fills me with joy as I watch them from my bed, swaying in the wind. Already, although it is only four o'clock in the afternoon, the lamplighter has passed down the Square and the dusk is blue. And at this moment the 'Anchor,' the jolly public-house at the corner, whose yellow plaster walls and trim upper windows bespeak prosperity, has begun to prick the gloom with its cheery lights. It is time that I ended. The kettle is boiling, and Mary will come in at any moment. Wish us luck, Peter, in our new home.

"Your friend,
"LESLEY."

"7A, Courtesy Square,
"Chelsea, S.W.,
"February 5th, 19—.

"DEAR PETER,

"I was so glad to get your letter and to hear how well your excavations are progressing. You ask me if I am willing to undertake the work of compiling a bibliography of the Roman books in the British Museum for noting the gaps in your own library, and as you say you

are in no hurry for it, I answer very gladly—yes. I spoke to Reggie Tirebuck about it, and as the work I have to do for him at the office does not entail my sitting there all day, he told me to do just what I chose in the matter. And I do choose, of course. Any work which brings me in touch with my beloved Italy is welcome, apart from the addition to my income.

"You must not picture me as seeing much of Reggie Tirebuck. Though he and I were friends in the old days he has the conventional sort of mind, which makes him shrink from any intimacy with me now that I am his assistant in the office of the *Morning Gazette*. During working hours, he is as formal with me as though I was a total stranger, and unless business takes us to some sale or exhibition together, I never see him from one end of the week to the other, except on the day when he comes to write up his copy. Lately, it is true, he has unbent a little, but he has never been to see us here, of course.

"If he did come, I am afraid he would have rather a shock, for, to speak truly, our beloved Courtesy Square verges on slumland. It matters not that only a few steps on the one hand bring us to South Kensington, and a few steps on the other to the River and Cheyne Walk. Even the Aylmers were prejudiced against the neighbourhood when they first came to see us. They chose an unfortunate hour—late on Saturday afternoon, when King's Road was teeming with noisy footballers on their way back from the Chelsea Football Ground, and the approach to every public-house was paved with loafers. But then we have slums quite close at hand, real quarrelsome slums, whose inhabitants are rarely seen in the daytime without a jug in their hands, and whose voices are only raised in what has been called by country poets the still hours of the night.

"You will know this when you come to see us, Peter—if ever that all-engrossing work of yours in Paulina's Garden on the Aventine lets you come back to England—for a penny fare on the bus from Sloane Square takes you to the 'World's End,' which is a public-house. And

Courtesy Square is almost at the World's End. I am quite serious, although it may sound as if I am writing a dream as wild as the Brushwood Boy's. You will find it stamped in black and white on the inside of the omnibus—*1d. Sloane Square to the 'World's End.'*

"But you, Peter, with your eyes attuned to the dear raggedness of Italy, will not be prejudiced. For in Chelsea, notwithstanding the tide of progress which has flooded London, sweeping away old traditions and associations and demolishing ancient buildings, which would be National Monuments in Italy or France, there are many unconsidered nooks with a touch of country lingering in them. Chelsea itself is like a dissipated village set in the heart of a city.

"And Courtesy Square is a true *rus in urbe.* Its shabby cottages, many of them half smothered in ivy, have trellised porches and slim gardens hedged about with privet. And in the little shops, country-like in their simplicity and heterogeneousness, live people who are more village-folk than townsmen—people who pause in their work to nod and smile and call a greeting, who do not think a bargain settled till they have passed the time of day on any subject that comes to hand—the weather, or the Shops Act, or the doings of the King and Queen, or their personal affairs.

"They are our friends, and we are friends of theirs. And you can't guess what this means, Peter, unless you have sojourned as a stranger in a strange land as I have done, and Mary too, for that matter, in this great lonely city. We are on the same terms of intimacy with them as though we were all members of a country village. There is the old furniture shop which undertook our simple moving—one small van sufficed to take all our belongings—and the tobacco shop, which sells as many sweets as cigarettes, and the little milk shop whose pretty fresh-faced girl has saved the situation for us more than once, when we have found ourselves with a bare larder on Sunday morning.

"Perhaps my greatest friend is the potato-man, whose

cheery oven with jolly fat potatoes stuck on prongs above the barrow, greets you at the corner of the street as you come back in the winter dusk. He is an Italian who hails from Cività Vecchia, and I always stop to chat with him, in my native tongue, much to the admiration of the small boys, who play round about in the glowing radius of the stove. Here you can buy steaming hot potatoes, which, wrapped in newspaper, warm you right through your winter coat on cold nights as you hurry back to supper. A penny buys a large one, but we soon found out that two halfpenny ones were the better bargain!

"When *I* go out to buy them they are always wrapped up in a sheet of his Italian paper. Whether this is a delicate compliment to my knowledge of the language I have never found out, but Mary's potatoes, when she goes to buy them, are wrapped in the tattered rags of English papers.

"But it is Ambrose Pyper, the grocer, whose premises are the club of Courtesy Square. His is a real village shop, which sells everything, from delicious cooked bacon and ham, good cheese and milk and bread down to the humblest household necessaries. Here the women gather to chat over their shopping, as much as their husbands do in the comfortable bar of the 'Anchor'—our village public-house!

"Talking of the grocer reminds me of a curious happening. One evening I found that there was no methylated spirit in the house, and went out to buy some. Being unversed in household ways, I went to my friend the grocer. He was standing on his counter, arranging his crowded top shelves. He glanced at the clock when I asked for methylated spirit and said, 'I don't sell it, but run, Miss, or you'll be too late.'

"'Why?' said I, feeling 'curiouser and curiouser.'

"'Because they won't sell it after dark.'

"It was dusk already.

"'Where can I get it?' cried I, helplessly.

"'You know the big public-house at the corner of King Street? Well, they sell it at the shop next door. But hurry, Miss, or you'll be too late!'

"I ran. I almost expected to see the Red Queen loom up beside me. It was quite dark in the little shop, but not too dark to conjure up the spirit, for it was forthcoming. While the shopkeeper was wrapping the bottle up, I asked him if it was true that they never sold it after dark.

"'Lor, no, Miss,' he said, 'only on Saturdays. We aren't allowed to sell it, leastways, we aren't supposed to, not after ten on Saturdays or before eight on Monday morning.'

"'Why? Is it a law?'

"'I don't rightly know,' he answered. 'But I think it's a wise idea—there's some folks as might drink it!'

"So much for our neighbours! Now, as you say that it will interest you, I will tell you about our life in 7A, Courtesy Square, which I call, in affection, the Little House of Repose.

"We are real Bohemia—we have not any fumed oak in our cottage like the moonlight flitter, who lived next door till he drifted silently out of our lives one night last week, nor any of the old pewter, which the Aylmers' friends always picture to themselves, when I say that we have a cottage in Chelsea. The carpets do not fit, and show a fringe of unpainted flooring in the bedrooms, which we were too busy at first to varnish, and have long ago given up any thought of touching, because we forget to notice it. And, as we do the greater part of our own laundry, it always happens that the clothes-horse, covered with all sorts of garments, is in front of the sitting-room fire when anyone comes to call. Such a clothes-horse it is, too! Very lame! It cost three shillings and sixpence, and went to pieces almost at once, and its joints are tied up with fragments of an ironing-sheet which was burnt to rags by incautious ironing. Our cooking arrangements are haphazard. Whenever we have Irish Stew we always help ourselves to it straight out of the saucepan, which is put on the table. Nothing in life ever tasted so good as Irish Stew out of a saucepan, a very black saucepan too.

"We have no servants as you know. Even if we could

afford one there is nowhere for her to sleep. But we have a dear little charwoman, called Emma, who comes to us for one day in the week, and turns 7A, and everything that is in it, topsy-turvy in a whirlwind of cleanliness. It was she who told us of the fried fish shop round the corner, where you can get a dinner of fish and potatoes for twopence. But you have to be very hungry, Peter, before you care for that kind of fish. And it was she who explained to us the mysteries of our penny-in-the-slot gas-meter, and warned us to insist on having some coppers returned to us when the gasman came to collect them, and told us the wildly interesting secret that new pennies extract more gas out of the meter than thin worn ones.

"Life has many surprises when you are poor and a householder, Peter! For who but the very poor know the real value of the thick fat shining pennies, which we all love instinctively? And who but the poor realize the economy of fetching the bread themselves from the baker, instead of having it brought to the door, for which luxury the rich pay an extra farthing on every loaf, to say nothing of foregoing the joys of overweight, which are yours when you buy it by the quartern?

"While I am writing a fierce altercation is going on under my windows. Emma was cleaning the front doorstep and sweeping the garden path. Then she went out and swept the flagged pathway which connects our six or seven cottages with Courtesy Square. There is a drain in it with a grating to take off superfluous water. It hardly ever acts. At nights, when there has been rain, you are apt to step from the garden gate into a lake. Still it is meant to be a drain. Like most things in Courtesy Square, it is well-intentioned. Directly Emma had finished, the woman next door came out and went over the ground again.

"'I' just done that,' said Emma.

"'Maybe,' retorted the char from next door. 'But I don' call it swep'!'

"'Who cares!' said Emma stoutly. 'I swep' it to my liking, and it's my bit of drain!'

"The doors of both houses banged-to violently. And there was silence: Emma is very fierce for her size.

"By all of which you will gather that we are happy, Peter, in our little backwater, where we spend our lives out of earshot of the tide of traffic, which flows up and down the Fulham Road and King's Road. We have turned our backs upon the thought of the lean years, that may yet come, as resolutely as our shabby cottage turns its back upon the Vale, where unfriendly new houses and blocks of flats and studios are being marshalled in their boundary of advertisement boards—the present highwater mark of the wave of Change, which threatens to overwhelm our beloved Courtesy Square.

"*A rivederci, amico mio.*

"LESLEY."

"7A, Courtesy Square,
"Chelsea, S.W.,
"April 14th, 19—.

"DEAR PETER,

"Make haste and come to see us, or else it will be too late! The wave of progress, which has threatened so long to overwhelm our little village of cottages, each in its own garden, is beginning to roar in our ears. To-day the landlord sent a workman to mend the fence, which separates our back yard from our neighbour's. He made an unsightly arrangement of barbed wire and corrugated iron. When I protested he scratched his head and said, in dubious tones—'Mr. Tew told me not to make a good job of it because the cottages have to come down in a year or so!'

"This then is the reason why we pay our rent each month instead of every quarter, and why James Tew drew up no agreement for us to sign when we entered on our tenancy!

"And we have grown to love it all so much! When the sun is out there is no prettier spot in London. And how the birds sing, especially in the hush of these April

mornings, when the misty sunshine weaves a veil between our windows and the giant elms, which mount guard at the far end of the square! I have come to know and love the individuality of every tree and every cottage, from the little spreading sycamore across the road, so brown when its leaves first burst through the sheaths of their buds, to the two young poplars, who stand like slim princesses with their feet among the daffodils, in the garden of the House of the Weathercock.

"I call it the House of the Weathercock because the first thing that my eyes light on when I wake in the morning is the weathercock on my neighbour's low roof. Because it is Spring, and his heart is rejoicing, he has filled his garden with flowers and painted his weathercock gold, and I love to lie abed the first thing in the morning and watch the arrow, as it swings to and fro, catching the eastern sun. But really the house of my neighbour should bear a more classic name, for just as we have a mask of Comedy peeping and grimacing above the ivy, which makes our cottage look like a jack-o'-the-green, he has a medieval-looking Bacchus smiling fatuously down at his little garden, and his walls are wreathed with vines.

"Most of the houses in the square have curious old plaster masks grinning from porch and roof, and one of them has an Italian fountain of cupids in its garden, dear joyous people born of a southern inspiration, derelicts no doubt from the studio of a forgotten artist.

"And just as I know and love Courtesy Square, and the people who live in it, so do I love the familiar sounds, which mark the passing of every hour. Very early in the morning, while London is still asleep, the sparrows begin to chatter in the ivy round my windows. A little later isolated footsteps ring up and down the pavement; the hammers of the masons at work on the church that they are building at the far end of the square start their *obbligato* to the great song of labour, which will presently ring through the whole city; and the pigeons, who nest under the

chimneys of the cottages, raise their soft voices as they sidle along the eaves.

"By eight o'clock the square is wide awake—children are being packed off to school; men and girls hurry by on their way to business; the paper-boy calls; and the postman's knock resounds at intervals, as he comes to first one door and then the other, up and down through the trim gardens.

"All through the day there is a long procession of hawkers, sellers of fruit, and fish, and flowers growing in pots: their raucous voices are seldom out of earshot. But there are certain habitués who are as regular in their rounds as the postman, like the cat's-meat man in the middle of the morning, with his insinuating, long-drawn-out cry of 'Meat! Me-e-at! M-e-e-eat!' and the cheery muffin-man, in a green baize apron, whose bell begins to ring in our neighbourhood just when the kettle starts humming on the stove.

"There is a little dumb child, who lives in a cottage close by. He does not go to school with the other children, and often during the day I hear his plaintive cry, like the note of a bird, which has no meaning to our ears. As the dusk closes down, the square resounds with the merry shouts and laughter of the other children playing their wild games. Later these too are stilled, like the chatter of the sparrows, who have long ere this fallen asleep in the ivy.

"By nine o'clock the brightly-lit bar of the 'Anchor' is full, and, when the swing-doors open, they emit a burst of jollity. This is the hour when street musicians come to play, and hardly a night goes by without the visit of a singer, or a musician with a guitar or an accordion, or a small hand-organ primed with the latest rag-time tunes.

"The 'Anchor' keeps late hours, but twelve-thirty sees the lights put out and the last roysterer sped. Then and then only is there silence, a silence deepened and emphasized by the lonely voices of sirens, as tugs pass up and down the river, a silence which only lasts a little while, because

the sparrows wake so early to begin their everlasting arguments in the ivy.

"I wish that you could come to see us now, Peter, while Courtesy Square is dressed in its fresh spring green, which is as beautiful as blossom on the pollard lime-trees, woven in a screen before the window of our sitting-room. The delicate pink shields, not yet dispersed by the wind, look like the lobes of a beauty's ear, and the shyly drooping leaves, still creased and limp from their buds, are a never-ceasing joy to me. I fear that I shall not love them half so much when they are large and sticky in the summer sunshine.

"It is the same story with my little poplar trees. They are very maidenly now and serious in their new greenery. Each day they grow more reserved, they purse their lips, and seem to gather their slim garments more closely together. Already they have hidden the secret of the nesting-box which our neighbours fastened into their branches to persuade the tomtits to make it their home. Somehow I regret their slim tassels, as I saw them through the winter, sweeping the sky above my muslin half-blind, like witches' brooms against the stars. At times they seem convulsed with laughter in the April breeze, and sway to and fro as though they beckoned me to hear some story. I have a grave suspicion that he is a wag, this young Spring wind, and brings them many a tale, which would have made the merry Olympians shout with laughter, and have delighted that sly Master of Amours—Boccaccio. I always think of him, as we saw him in Botticelli's Primavera that time we all motored to Florence.

"On my table as I write is a spray of lilac. Every now and then, when the sun shines into my room from between the April clouds, a breath of fragrance steals to my nostrils, and I feel a queer thrill in my heart, half pain, half ecstasy, in its beauty. The lilac is thrust, into what do you think, Peter, you who only know me as I was in the old days in Rome, where there was a bewildering choice of crystal vases and gilt Venetian glass to put my flowers into—

a broken-mouthed half-pint bottle, in which I carried home some milk only yesterday from the little dairy across the way?

"Am I changed out of all recognition that this does not fret me, Peter? Is it deterioration, do you think, or is it that my eyes, which once were closed, are now opened so that I may see?

"Perhaps poverty has the same effect upon our minds as work: it shows us the soul of things as work shows us the souls of our fellow-men.

"Mary told me a beautiful story to-day. When she was working in a ready-made clothes factory she sat beside a girl of whom she made a friend. The girl was taken ill, and Mary went to her home to see her. When she had made her comfortable in bed, she said, 'Now, Janet, I will make you a cup of tea and some nice hot toast before I go away. Where is the bread?' The girl pointed out where it was lying in the cupboard, wrapped up in her clean apron. But when Mary unwrapped it, the girl called out. 'Why, Mother, look at the bread! You ain't eaten nothing to-day; I know it by the size of the loaf!'

"'Eh, Janet,' said the mother, 'd'ye think I'd touch a bite while *you* can't eat!'

"Now the mother was a terrible old hag, dirty and ragged, lost to all sense of decency in the eyes of most people, but the devotion between these two poor women was a beautiful thing. The other day the mother died, and Janet was talking to Mary about her.

"'You know, Miss Strange,' she said, 'I allus thought that mother was one of the Unfortunates. But I never liked to ask her!' And they had lived in that room together for more than twenty years.

"Was it not a miracle of delicacy to find such inborn gentlewomanliness in the heart of this rough factory girl! Truly it is not only those who go down to the sea in ships, who see the wonders of the Lord!

* * * * * *

"I hope your difficulties with the Italian Government won't seriously delay you in your excavations. If you should have any time to spare, because they are hanging fire about their decision, go and see Clarence Verity in the flat on Trinità del Monte. It would please me if you two were friends.

"LESLEY."

CHAPTER XXII

REGINALD TIREBUCK, CONNOISSEUR

ALL through December and January Lesley read and classified alone at the offices of the *Morning Gazette*. She had pictured her work with Tirebuck bringing them together at least as much as an editor and his shorthand secretary. She thought that she would have to be constantly with him, while he was at the office, discussing the points she had discovered in her researches, and, incidentally, having long and delightful talks about Art and Italy. But he remained entirely impersonal and, though he was scrupulously courteous, never once gave her an invitation and never once called at the cottage.

He worked as little as possible with her; he instructed her as to the way in which he wanted his notes prepared for him, and took them from her with formal courtesy and let her go back to her place, while he wrote ostentatiously alone.

And yet, all the while, if she had only known it, his eyes often rested on her with approval through the walls of the glass house, in which he lived during his editorial hours. He liked the quiet neatness with which she dressed, and he liked the way she kept to herself, though she was friendly with the other people in the office when she came in contact with them.

Then one day, early in February, Mr. Van Straubenzee

asked Reginald Tirebuck to look in and have a chat with him.

"Are you satisfied with Miss Brydges?" he asked, when he had offered him various "smokes" in vain.

"Perfectly. Why do you ask?"

"Your work, I believe, does not take up all her time?"

"I don't see that this matters to anyone but myself," he answered stiffly and with rising colour. "She was only engaged to help me. Aren't you satisfied with my columns?"

"Extremely."

"Then I don't quite see why Miss Brydges should be worried."

"But who's going to worry her, my dear chap, unless she thinks it a worry to have a chance of making more money."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I thought of offering her some work—and paying for it, in another part of the paper."

"What sort of work?"

"Woman's work," said the great editor, vaguely.

"I am sure she would be most grateful," said Tirebuck, "if you offer her something, which she considers within her powers."

The next time Lesley went to the office a message was brought to her that the Editor wished to see her.

She followed the messenger with a horrible sinking at the heart. What could he want her for except to tell her that, for this or the other reason, he no longer needed her services.

It was part of the persistent bad luck, which had dogged her footsteps, that, just when she felt so completely settled at the *Morning Gazette*, and well in the stride with her work, it should collapse by no fault of her own.

There was one thing—Mr. Van Straubenzee's manner in dismissing her was more cordial than Tirebuck's in working with her.

He jumped up from the editorial throne, and shook hands with her, and led her to a comfortable arm-chair.

She sat down. She reflected that, if she made herself comfortable, it would give her the opportunity of fighting things out; she could not be bowed out of an arm-chair. He resumed his seat, put his eyeglass into his mouth, polished it with a silk pocket handkerchief, put it back into his eye and frowned it into position. Then he gave a nervous little laugh. They were all signs that he had something on his lips which he found it difficult to say. The void under Lesley's heart grew bigger.

He jerked out, "Mr. Tirebuck says that his work does not take up all your time."

Her fear was giving way to resentment. Was a great newspaper like the *Morning Gazette*, because she did the work, for which she had been engaged, in less than the office hours owing to her industry, going to sweat her by giving her other work to fill up the time, like Mr. Urfont or Mrs. Skinner? Poverty is suspicious.

She said nothing, but waited for him to proceed.

"Mr. Tirebuck says that you do your work extremely well."

A faint colouring of pleasure came into her cheeks, but she still waited.

"So I am going to give you the opportunity of making a little more money by offering you work in another part of the paper. What can you do?"

Lesley was non-plussed: she thought hard, while the editor sucked his eyeglass again.

"Could you conduct a correspondence against the militants?" he asked.

"No," said Lesley decidedly. "I'm in favour of women having the suffrage."

"So was I, my dear young lady, till they 'ragged' me out of it by their idiotic behaviour. I should not have thought that you were in favour of this malignant campaign against defenceless empty mansions, this depriving certain poor men, who lived by taking care of the nation's orchids, of their wages, and this robbing certain poor women, who made their living out of tea pavilions in public gardens, of their subsistence."

"I think all that is hateful," said Lesley.

"Very well then. Why isn't the road clear?"

"Because, militant or not militant, we women must hold together, if we are to accomplish anything. It's no good pulling down unless we have something to build up in the place of what we destroy. If I had a better campaign to advance I would take your offer willingly. But I won't raise my voice against militancy, even though I disapprove of it, until I have something more effective to offer in its place."

Mr. Van Straubenzee stared at her thoughtfully.

"I am sorry," he said. "I had hoped to help Mark Aylmer's friend, and the daughter of such a brilliant cricketer. And I should have liked to help *you*."

He was obviously attracted to her: but he was respectful as well as kindly.

As she was going out of the room he said, "I must try and find some work for you to do, which does not clash with your principles. At the time this is the only thing which has occurred to me."

Mr. Van Straubenzee's sudden interest in Lesley gave Tirebuck food for thought. If men like Mark Aylmer and Van Straubenzee were alive to the fact that Lesley was a charming and intelligent woman, what was a connoisseur like himself, who had the opportunity of enjoying her society every day in the week, doing to be blind to it? And he confessed to himself that he liked and respected Lesley for not having made the slightest attempt to cultivate his friendship, while business brought her into contact with him. He decided that he had exaggerated the importance of office gossip.

The following Saturday he asked Lesley to go to the Annual Excursion of the Chippendale Club with him. This year it was to be at Warwick, which Lesley had never seen.

It was an artful invitation, because it seemed to arise out of her work, and yet it was an invitation which anyone might prize, for the afternoon was to be spent in examining the treasures of Warwick Castle.

Lesley accepted it as a duty, and merely made herself look her nicest because she was going with Tirebuck, and she knew how particular he was.

Tirebuck on his part was more impressed than he would have admitted by the effect which Lesley had on the party.

She went home with a sheaf of invitations which were to be confirmed in writing. Other people were not so insensible as Reginald Tirebuck.

When he realized how eagerly she was being taken up by his set, he began to wake up. He had found an article of *vertu*, an unrecognized piece of Chippendale. And Lesley was gratified, because Reginald was a connoisseur.

It was about this time that Peter Webbe wrote to offer her the work at the British Museum, which used up her spare time and made her less straitened in her means, so that she could afford to buy decent gloves and shoes again. She was quite unconscious of the fact that the making of this offer was the outcome of much thought on Peter's part. He had been shocked to find her looking so thin and pale in Hobury's, and he guessed that she had been, even if she was not at the time, in low water. His intention had been to come back within a month at the latest and, as he put it vaguely to himself, "look after her." But he had not been two days in Rome before the Italian Government had made him the offer to begin some extremely important excavations in Paulina's house: chambers and chambers of it, like the house of the two martyrs on the Caelian, had been discovered under a church on the Aventine. And he had accepted it without realizing how impossible it would be for him to get away to England, when the work was once set in train. But he worried a great deal about Lesley and longed to help in some way or other, which would relieve her poverty. He felt himself quite sly and insidious for devising this means. The need of the bibliography was perhaps a prevarication, but it was a venial one, and would be forgiven him. It would not only enable him to help her, but would confer a perpetually recurring

pleasure on him in the correspondence, which it would entail.

Meanwhile Reginald Tirebuck, that most precise young man, seeing which way the wind blew, even came to taxi her to parties and bringing her home again. From play their companionship spread to work, and Lesley grew to admire him for his reserve and refinement.

Reginald discovered that he had been handicapping himself in his work by making her leave her notes and cuttings on the table before him in the glass editorial cage, and retire to her own table in the general room. When she was with him, she was able to make felicitous suggestions, and to put her finger with a woman's quickness on whatever piece of information had to be morticed in. And it made the hours in which he was engaged in writing his columns for the *Morning Gazette* a delightful entertainment.

Lesley enjoyed it too, for Tirebuck was so saturated with his subject, that every paragraph was illuminating, and as he noticed how interested she became in a study, which was new to her, of examples with which she was familiar, he let himself be drawn into conversation as her woman's fancy willed.

He discovered, not much later, that if he dictated to her, it was natural for him to watch her to see when she was ready to take down another sentence. The play that intelligence made upon her mobile features as he built up an article, which was an essay as well as a list of transactions and announcements, was flattering no less than fascinating.

He thought out what he should wear to meet her at the office, as carefully as he thought out what he should wear to meet a Duchess or a Melba in Grosvenor Square, though it might only be selecting what socks and tie and handkerchief he should wear with blue flannels or an Irish tweed. And this was not lost on Lesley, who liked a man to be spick and span, if he was not going to foozle at the job he had in hand.

Reginald Tirebuck never foozled. If he could not

do a thing in good style he did not do it at all. And, when his feelings were touched, as they were beginning to be touched now, there was something boyish and ingenuous about him, which was uncommonly engaging. He had beautiful teeth and a contagious laugh, which he was shy of indulging before strangers. He was capable of being deeply in love, and, though he was far from allowing himself to acknowledge the fact, he was falling rapidly into a devotion for Lesley.

But he treated his passion in the old-fashioned way. Nothing was to be said about it until every defence had been beaten down. There was to be no rude storming by infantry, the position was to be scientifically reduced by artillery, and then there was to be a formal summons.

Lesley was hardly to blame. If Tirebuck had been any other but himself, she would have scented danger, but that the great Reginald should contemplate bestowing the honour of his hand upon her was inconceivable. For Reggie, with his income, and his position, and his very attractive and well-kept appearance, was decidedly an eligible young man, and quite aware of the fact. His action in giving up his work with Abingdon of *The Carlton* would have given her furiously to think, if he had been anyone but himself, or if he had evinced the slightest personal interest in her or her affairs during the years that she had been trying to earn a living in London. But he had never shown the shadow of a desire to be anything more than an acquaintance, and Lesley, after much puzzling, could only assign his change to his general kindliness, and indignation at outraged conventions. And this was true to a large extent, at the outset.

Woman-like she allowed him to usurp her. So night after night, wherever Lesley with her restored pride in life was to be found, there was Reggie Tirebuck, *bien soigné*, sure of himself, but half ashamed of his docility.

One Monday night, when they were at the Aylmers, Van Straubenzee was standing about in the crowded Moorish Hall, taking in everything through that eye-glass, which appeared to be the window of a mind to let.

Presently he espied Lesley. In the charming evening frock which Mrs. Andrewes had insisted on giving to her, when she left the flat at Maida Vale, she looked so different from the quiet tailor-made girl, whom he had seen coming out of his office, that he had to turn his searchlight on her twice. By her side was a singularly well-turned-out man, who had no eyes for anyone else, so satisfied was he with the artistic completeness of his companion.

" Aylmer ! " he called, as his host passed him.

" What is it, Strawberry ? "

" There's that girl."

The remark sounded cryptic, but a glance in the line of fire of the eye-glass showed that he refered to Lesley.

" Yes, that's Miss Brydges. Have you done what I told you yet ? "

" No, not yet."

Not yet was Mr. Van Straubenzee's chief weakness.

" But, by Jove, it's worth looking into."

" You seem to think so, Strawberry," said Mark Aylmer, smiling.

The great Editor was not disconcerted. " And there's Reginald Tirebuck with her," he commented. " Dear me, I wonder what they think of it in the office ! "

The office was surprised that Tirebuck had persistently disregarded Lesley, and only recently allowed her to give him her personal help.

Tirebuck, unconscious that the eyes of his chief were upon him, was hovering about Lesley showing his white teeth in the smile, which he permitted himself so rarely, and refraining from saying anything till he had something to say worth hearing. They were two such eminently nice-looking young people that those, who knew of their connection in business, could only predict one end for such a well-matched pair.

But, though Reginald Tirebuck was becoming every day more sure of himself, Lesley was far from easy in her mind. A chance remark of Marian Aylmer's revealed to her the fact that the set, in which she moved, took it for granted that she would accept Tirebuck as a husband.

The possibility had never entered Lesley's head. She liked him extremely, he was so interesting, so genuine under all his affectations, so kindly, and latterly—she could not deny it now that the idea had been presented to her, so devoted. In the many hours they had spent together at play or work he had never failed to be an almost ideal companion. And she was under a deep obligation to him. It was the sense of this obligation that had helped her to put aside the thought of the slights, which he had seemed to rejoice in inflicting upon her, when she first became his assistant on the *Morning Gazette*. He had so carefully eliminated all trace of their former friendship, and made such an effort to impress upon her that there was to be no camaraderie in their work, that she had been bitterly hurt, though she was far too proud not to accept the situation, and treat him simply as her employer.

At first she had felt inclined to resent his efforts to pick up the threads of their friendship. But Reginald Tirebuck was not the kind of man to make a blunder over an affair of this sort, especially when he had all the materials at hand. It was difficult at the outset to say where friendship began and business ended. He engineered every move in the campaign with consummate tact. And, before long, Lesley, who was a very human young woman, being flattered by the deference with which he treated her, and by his evident desire to please, shrugged her shoulders over the inexplicable change in his manner. She put his former coldness down to the same cause, which moved him to make the vital sacrifice of throwing up his post with the great Abingdon for her—the awe in which he held conventions. But she was not quite correct in this surmise. For though Tirebuck had a horror of mixing up personal affairs with business, and certainly dreaded the thought of office gossip, it was the secret fear that he might do the obvious thing and fall in love with Lesley, which had kept him away from her, just as it was the open admiration of Aylmer and Van Straubenzee and the friends to whom he introduced her at the Chippen-

dale Club Excursion, which made him alive to her personality.

But though Lesley was grateful to Reginald Tirebuck, and though she was fond of his companionship, she was always conscious of the barrier of conventionality, which cut him off from the greater part of her life and the greater part of her thoughts. They had many interests in common, but there was a side of her nature, of which he was entirely ignorant. She was desperately human, and he had frowned humanity out of their conversations in the early days of their friendship. He was afraid of her ardour and sincerity. He himself never touched any of the real propositions of life without drawing on moral kid gloves—a woman, he considered, should be blindfolded as well. He was incapable of thinking except on well-regulated lines, just as he was incapable of acting on any but conventional lines. Lesley had seen, and inwardly writhed at, his quick glance at her finger tips on more than one occasion, when they had been dining together and she, with fires to light and rooms to sweep and dishes to clean in the short time between office hours and dressing for the evening, had omitted to polish her nails. They were clean enough, hot water and a nail brush will accomplish that even after five minutes excavation in the coal cellar, when lumps of coal are scarce, but they were not manicured like his own finger tips. And on one occasion, before their intimacy had been renewed, she had had a memorable contretemps with Tirebuck, in the King's Road only a minute's walk from Courtesy Square.

It was a Saturday, and Reginald in the full glory of white spats and patent leather, was picking his way down Beaufort Street to a luncheon party in Cheyne Walk, when he came face to face with Lesley—Lesley hatless, clad in an old skirt and golf jersey, and carrying something in an ungloved hand.

"Whatever are you doing, my dear Miss Brydges," he had said, aghast at the thought that someone he knew might pass.

"I'd just bought this egg for my lunch," explained Lesley, with a merry laugh at his discomfiture, holding out her hand so that he could see the egg, still hot from its boiling but with its top knocked off showing its discoloured interior. "And it's bad. So I'm taking it back to the dairy: they give you another, you know."

He looked so disgusted that she was quite certain that he had never met anything as ill-regulated as an addled egg before.

It was the same with her intelligence. She was brought up against a blank wall of non-understanding directly she tried to lead him out of his own high road of thought.

And this was the man whom Marian Aylmer tried to impress on her that she ought to marry. Lesley found herself faced with a problem. What was going to happen to her work on the *Morning Gazette*, if Tirebuck did ask her to marry him, and she said no? She had no doubt of the chivalry with which he would act. But could she honourably go on with the work?

Once more she was confronted with the dread of having to face poverty, and the idea called for more courage now that she had enjoyed a taste of the old ease again. The thought of going back to being a shop assistant, after the many interests of her work on the *Morning Gazette*, appalled her.

Meanwhile Reginald Tirebuck bided his time, and made himself as indispensable as possible.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ADVENT OF PETER

ALTHOUGH Tirebuck was so much in love with Lesley that he gave her all his thoughts, which were not given to his work, he had the self-restraint not to ask her to marry him until he was sure that his proposal would be agreeable to her.

And at this late stage the proposal might have made her pull herself together, and decide definitely against him. But while he was content to pay her the most faithful service, and ask nothing in return except her society, she had to let things drift. And they all seemed to drift one way—in favour of the man in possession, who played his cards in such an orthodox and gentlemanly fashion, that one day she would grow tired of resisting, and hang out the white flag.

Even to herself Lesley acknowledged that she was drifting, when a thing happened which changed her whole outlook, and Tirebuck, who had loomed so large in the landscape of her life, fell back again into his proper perspective.

It was the last Saturday in April, and Lesley, who had come in late from her work at the British Museum, found a note pinned to the table to say that Mary had finished lunch and gone out again. Lesley went into the little kitchen where Demon, the wire-haired terrier, which Mark Aylmer had insisted on giving her when she first

went into the cottage, because he did not like the look of the neighbourhood, was busy, pretending to look for mice. She prepared her lunch on a tray—a sketchy meal of apples and bread and butter—and carried it into the little sitting-room. Demon pattered after her, and lay down with a heavy sigh. He had eaten his own biscuit, and he knew by long experience that lunch was a meal which brought no hope of tit-bits. For what self-respecting terrier cares to eat bread and butter!

Lesley propped the *Daily Telegraph* up against the jug of drinking water, and read steadily. When she had demolished her meal, she cleared it away, and washed up the plates. It was not until she had finished this task and returned to the sitting-room that she began to notice the blandishments of the faithful Demon. Demon was aware of the fact that Lesley was out of spirits. She had neither whistled nor sung while she busied herself in the kitchen, nor had his antics, in the chase after imaginary mice behind the dining-room stove, distracted her from the newspaper at lunch. Now she was sitting in the big old arm-chair, smoking and looking straight in front of her. Demon considered that her time could be better employed. He pattered solemnly about the house until he found his treasured tennis-ball. With a flourish of his tail, he deposited it by her feet, and waited developments, his eyes on her face.

Lesley picked up the ball. "Oh, Demon," she said, "life's full of uncertainties!"

Demon wagged his tail expectantly. His eyes glanced quickly from the ball to Lesley's face, and back again.

Lesley threw the ball for him, and he scurried triumphantly up and down the room with it, dropping it invitingly now and again in the hope that she would romp with him. But Lesley was not in the mood to play. Reginald Tirebuck had been "difficult" the day before, and she despaired of evading the proposal which, if she refused it, must result in her having to give up this most desirable work on the *Morning Gazette*. Her spirits drooped at the idea. And in any case, even if she were fortunate enough to find

another post in which she would earn enough to keep the cottage, she could not go on living here permanently, for the cottage was to be pulled down soon. Lesley looked forward to cheap lodgings, or even the restrictions of the Club, with positive distaste. For another thing, Mary had been restless of late, and was growing each day more firmly resolved to throw up her work in the studios and go to the Colonies. On every side Lesley saw nothing but change and uncertainty.

In spite of the efforts of Demon, she allowed herself to drift into the luxury of a fit of the blues. She thought of Agnes, and the curious independence which she had acquired; and she thought of Mary, and the stubborn courage, which was driving her out to new lands to seek for a fuller life. A strong motive power had been evolved out of the personality of each of these two women, which was controlling the action of their lives.

"Paris or the Colonies!" Agnes had said in the early days, long before she went away with Dolly Illington. Well, Agnes had chosen Paris—the call of the earth had no meaning for her—and Mary had turned her thoughts towards the Colonies. Lesley doubted if Paris had ever been an alternative in Mary's mind.

But she herself had hesitated. She had not been sure enough of her courage, of her power of endurance, of her capacity for self-sacrifice, to follow Mary, and Paris had not held out enough inducement to tempt her into Agnes's footsteps.

It was not Paris that she had wanted, or all that Paris, as Agnes had expressed it so laconically, stood for. Jewels, costly furs and aigrettes, a feverish round of gaiety, excitements, extravagances, and the love of the many, were not what she craved for. Sometimes, in the old days at Hobury's, when she had walked back from the shop at the hour when the streets are crowded with motors, and had glimpsed men and women, daintily clad, on their way to swim in the Tide of Pleasure flowing westward, she had felt a pang of envy. But it was not envy for the sumptuous embroideries and laces, for the

gaiety of music and light, the sparkle of wine, the flavour of delicate food. It was a dull ache, because, having been in that world herself, she knew how much this outward show of pleasure stood for—leisure and dignity, a delicacy of thought, as far removed from the life of a working woman as the daintiness of attire, which marks the outward difference between the rich and the poor. She could visualize the books, the flowers, the lovely rooms, the interesting and well-bred people met together; she knew that for those people there were love, comradeship, friendship, interests and a score of other brightly coloured skeins to weave into the tapestry of their lives.

And Paris in the sense that Agnes meant it, would not give her these. No, though she lacked the courage to accompany her, her thoughts were more in unison with Mary's. She could see the beauty and the great simplicity to which life might attain in the new world, where men and women worked with the sweat of their brow to reclaim the earth, and build up the Dominion. But she was conscious that she lacked the intense motive which made the road clear to Mary.

The clouds of depression seemed to thicken round Lesley as she sat in the shabby arm-chair, oblivious of the April sunshine, which flickered and waned fitfully through the open window. "I have stopped growing mentally," she said to herself. "Just as I have stopped growing physically. Here am I, a woman of thirty, and with no motive power to guide my actions and give me the steady purpose to be 'master of my fate and captain of my soul.' I am drifting."

It was not strictly true to say that she was thirty, but there are moods in which we add to our age.

A church clock, very far away, struck the hour. One, two, three, four! Lesley felt a twinge of remorse. She had refused to go to a private show of pictures with Reginald Tirebuck because she had work to do on Peter Webbe's bibliography. And here it was four o'clock, and she had not touched her notes since she came in. She

collected the ends of her cigarettes and threw them away, and had just spread out her papers on the table when Demon, who had retired to the front-door in despair of getting a game of ball, and was lying in wait for his enemy the postman, sprang up with a volley of barks.

Someone had paused outside the little iron gate, and then opened it. There were footsteps on the garden path, and a knock at the door. "Who can that be?" wondered Lesley. It was not a tradesman's knock.

Demon was contenting himself with low growls and violent sniffing below the door.

Lesley went on with her work. If it was anyone important, he would knock again; it was probably a beggar, or someone canvassing for liver pills or old false teeth.

Rat-tat! went the knocker again: there was no bell to the door of 7A, Courtesy Square.

Lesley laid down her pen. She picked up the excited Demon, who could be relied on to bite strangers, and opened the door.

There stood not a beggar or a canvasser, but Peter Webbe, in the familiar blue serge and soft felt hat of Rome, saying, "I've come back."

He hesitated a minute when he saw how she was dressed, the kind of house she lived in, the bareness of the hall, the having no servant to open the door. Tirebuck would certainly not have approved of her now, for when she came in she had changed into a Donegal golfing skirt the worse for wear, and an old silk shirt which had gone yellow with laundering, and she had not rolled down her sleeves after washing-up lunch.

Peter felt that he was intruding on her poverty, that she might prefer to meet him on neutral ground, and when she had on her tidy clothes. He knew how such an intrusion would be resented in Italy, where the people, who wore the finest feathers on the Pincian, might go about in old red flannel dressing-gowns at home.

But after the first shock, there was no hesitation in Lesley's greeting. She was still clasping Demon in her arms, but she flung the door as wide open as it would go—

it always stuck on the carpet, because the wood was swollen with winter rains and needed planing—and held out her free hand impulsively.

"Oh, Peter!" she cried. "You strange person, to drop from the skies like this! Come in! Come in! But why didn't you let me know that you were in England, so that I could have swept and garnished the place for you?"

"I'd rather see it as it is," said Peter, relieved at his reception, though directly she opened the door he had cursed himself for his stupidity in not writing to let her know, in case she did not want him to catch her unawares.

He stepped in carefully—the cottage was so small that he felt large out of all proportion—and looked for the mat to wipe his feet on.

"We haven't got a mat," said Lesley. "That's one of the things we haven't been able to afford yet!"

Peter smiled indulgently, and entered their one tiny sitting-room, whose floor was covered with a slice off a Turkey carpet, which had a hole burnt in it. The hole was backed with red felt, and it had been engineered to come under the table, but Peter's eye was trained by his excavations to observe, and he noted it, and many other signs of poverty. Yet in spite of its damaged furniture, the room had a distinct attraction, for the walls were cream-washed instead of papered, and the panelled window-frame, and the jam-cupboards on either side of the fireplace, and the doors and wainscoting, were painted brown. It was all very faded and shabby, and the table, chosen out of James Tew's collection for utility, was much too large for the room, which looked as if a centenarian had died in it, and had had nothing restored after he was seventy, because he might not live to wear it out. It had just the old world grace that such a room might have had.

Peter's eye was attuned by a long residence in Italy to second-hand effects, and, though at his first glance, he was appalled by the poverty, at the second he saw how well everything suited.

Lesley had let Demon go now, and he was investigating

Peter's boots to find out if he was to be trusted. Suddenly he made up his mind that this was a friend, and stood up on his hind legs, snuffling against Peter.

"You can laugh, Peter, if you like," said Lesley. "I know it's very incongruous."

But Peter, with his hand on Demon's rough head, looked at her with the old kind look in his blue eyes, and said: "Why should I laugh, my dear? It's a home."

He followed her out into the small, dark kitchen, when she went to boil the water for tea and make some hot buttered toast.

"I can't give you anything but toast for tea," she said. "We have no cakes in the cottage. Besides, you might not like the cakes of Poverty. They are sometimes the last refuge of the old-maid egg."

"I don't eat anything with my tea," said Peter. He was one of those people who go on quietly filling their cups.

When they had broken the ice he said: "I'm so glad you've given up that horrible shop-work. You can't think how I loathed seeing you doing it!"

"But I was happier there than I had been since I left Rome."

"How could you have been happy there, Lesley?"

"Because it was the first work I found which gave me any incentive."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in the shops you get the same incentive as a man gets in his business—the hope of eventual independence. You wouldn't find men willing to work all their lives on a wage, which was not a living wage, with the knowledge that, at the end of it, they would just be turned off to make room for younger men, no matter how keen they had been in their work, or how capable they were of undertaking responsibility?"

"But you do hear about men like that," said Peter doubtfully.

"Well, even if you do, they're the exception, not the rule. With women it's the other way round. In eight cases out of ten the work which they take up promises

nothing but destitution in the end, when they are knocked out of the running by age or ill-health, or the eagerness of younger women, fresh from schools and colleges, pressing on their heels."

"But if a woman's educated she must be able to get work," urged Peter.

"Oh yes, they do get work, some of them, which brings them to independence, or a reasonable living wage, just as some of them marry and have homes of their own. Matters are better than they used to be in that respect, because every year opens up fresh branches of women's work. But I am speaking now of the rank and file who are not educated to work. In families, where boys are brought up to earn their living as a matter of course, girls are allowed to run wild after they leave school, while they wait for the problematical husband, whom they are all taught to expect, to arrive."

"But I think that's right," said Peter, in his gentle way. "After all, home is women's sphere, isn't it? And it's natural for men to have to work, because they will most of them have to support homes and families of their own."

"Oh, Peter!" cried Lesley. "What a hopeless dreamer you are! Have you forgotten the women who don't marry? The ones that either can't or won't marry!"

"No, I hadn't forgotten them exactly. But there is a good deal of work for women to do, like being governesses and secretaries and all that sort of thing, which doesn't require the same kind of business education as a man's."

"If you only knew it, Peter, it's these very ideas of yours which have been the ruination of so many of us women. I know they have chivalry at the root of them, but they are so old-fashioned! It is these governesses, these secretaries who form the ranks of the women, who either starve in their old age, or else fall back on charity. They take this sort of work in spite of the lowness of the wages, because it is the first that comes to hand, and because it is supposed not to be degrading, like trade. Governesses always remind me of Consols, and there is no profession so overcrowded as theirs."

"I suppose I am old-fashioned, as you say, but I can't help it. I was almost stunned when I saw you in a shop."

"There are worse things than serving in a shop, Peter. You should have seen me when I was general servant to a pawnbroker's wife!"

"General servant!"

"Well, they called me a nursery-governess, but I was really nurse-housemaid. That's one of the positions which you would condemn your poor superfluous gentlewomen to take. It's the worst kind of slavery, with no possible chance of promotion!"

"But even if you train women, what then?"

"They have a fighting chance, and when they see that the branch of work for which they are trained is overstocked, they will go out to the Colonies or wherever else in the world there are suitable openings. You see, Peter, women have changed: they are no longer willing to be drones: the day of the poor relation is past. Now every one of these once superfluous women wants to be a capable citizen, an individual, a definite force. We're climbing."

"But you're climbing too fast," said Peter. "You forget that the men of this generation are standing still; you'll climb right away from us all. The time will come when you won't think it worth while to marry us. You'll develop your brains, and your capacity for business, until you'll get so engrossed in your professions, that you'll hesitate to give them up to become just wives and mothers."

"Oh, Peter! What a man's phrase! '*Just wives and mothers!*' As if the cleverest woman in the world didn't know that it is the most wonderful thing in life to have babies, and bring them up healthy and strong, and train them to grow into real men and women! She knows well enough that she has need of all her wit and her brilliance and her brains for that.

"As for the argument that because women are on the upward march and the men are standing still, a natural result of the woman's movement will be to stop marriage, the whole idea is ridiculous. I hope that women *are*

getting higher and better all the time. The more they learn, the higher they will climb. Are you going to hold them back because the men are not ready to follow? You confess, I suppose, that there is room for improvement on the men's side? Or else, where is the force of your argument: if they are at the top already, our climbing only brings us up to their level.

"To me it's like this. Men have climbed the hills of civilization ever since the beginning of history. They have scaled the heights of science, of exploration, and of intellect. But, since the world still suffers blindly, just as it suffered in the beginning, there must be some heights yet left to conquer—precipitous heights of right and wrong, where even the staff of religion is powerless to help. And perhaps we women, equipped with the memory of the terrible useless tears of the past, and strong in the consciousness of service to be rendered, are setting our faces towards these heights. You have scaled mountains that we can never hope to conquer, but an army can follow in our footsteps. Will you hold us back?

"As for the point of view that we shall not want to become wives and mothers—we shall marry just the same, as long as men are men and women are women: and however high we climb we shall always want babies. That's Nature, and you can't get away from it. And I think it's going to be a splendid thing for the next generation that the women of to-day are climbing so high, yes, and looking so high for their mates. Don't you think that their sons will be a little better for it? Oh, I'm not belittling the men of to-day! It was you who raised the point that they were not keeping pace with the women in their forward march."

"But think of the Militants, Lesley!"

"Nothing was born without travail. You must remember that we have a great deal of headway to make up, and some of us climb unsteadily. That's why we seem to be going so fast now. We have a lot to learn from you men. But we are never going to lose the mother-instinct—we are too proud of it. Besides, we couldn't if we tried,

it is a part of ourselves. That's why, if you could look into their hearts, you would find that some of the great climbers are very lonely, Peter."

"How you have changed, Lesley! When you talk like this I can't feel that you are the same girl who used to golf and motor with me in Italy. Do you remember it all, I wonder, as I do? I sometimes think that I can remember every minute which we spent together."

"Yes, I remember it all. But it seems very far away. I used to be happy in a curious blank sort of way, just as a kitten, whose eyes are not opened, is contented to lie against its mother's soft fur in a basket."

"You could be happy there still," said Peter. "The hills are as beautiful, the sun as warm, the air as full of the magic and romance of life."

"Oh, Peter, say some more things like that!"

"I can't say them. I can only feel them out loud."

"You're thinking of those lines in *Antony and Cleopatra*."

"What lines?"

"Don't you remember Charmian's saying to the Soothsayer:

'Good sir, give me good fortune!'

and his saying to her:

'I make not, but foresee!'

and her persisting:

'Pray, then, foresee me one!'"

"You make me ashamed. I, of all people, should know every line that Shakespeare ever wrote about Rome."

"Oh, Peter, it wasn't written about Rome, it was written about Egypt."

Peter smiled. Shakespeare was not one of his studies.

And then they fell to talking of the old days, and Peter spoke of Clarence Verity, whom he had seen several times that winter.

"I like him very much," he said. "He's a splendid athlete, and a good all-round sort of man. He tried to take an interest in my work, but it's not his line. I can't

help feeling that he's not very happy about something." Peter's blue eyes met Lesley's searchingly. He had wondered many times what had induced a man of Clarence Verity's age and physique to settle down in the Brydges' flat. When he went to see him there, he had been amazed to find how little this strange young man had altered the arrangement of the furniture and bric-à-brac, which remained almost exactly as it had been left, when Lesley and her stepmother quitted Rome.

Lesley, who had flushed at the first mention of Clarence's name, evaded his eyes, nor did she answer with her usual frankness. Peter, whose mind was not too deliberate to move quickly on occasion, jumped to the obvious conclusion. There was something between these two! He felt an unaccountable sinking of the heart: it was like the first chill breath of autumn loosening the leaves in a garden.

He looked at his watch: it was nearer seven than six.

"I have stayed so long," he said, "that I am afraid I have broken in upon your dinner hour."

But Lesley, who had not guessed his thought, said merrily: "Don't be so formal, Peter. Besides, we don't have dinner: we have something which takes as little cooking and as little washing-up as possible—a sardine or an egg."

"You are not going to dine off a sardine to-night," said Peter. "There's a restaurant called the 'Italie' in Soho, where you are going to have a regular Italian dinner with me. You and I and the waiters and the proprietor will all talk Italian to each other, and, afterwards, we will sit in the smoking-room and watch the respectable anarchists playing dominoes. You still smoke, Lesley?"

"Yes. I'd rather go without my sardine than my cigarette. But if you are really going to take me out to dinner, Peter, you must let me have twenty minutes to make myself more presentable."

"Please don't, Lesley: let's be vagabonds. They are all Bohemians or murderers at the 'Italie.'"

"Very well, then. I'll go and put on my hat. Whistle

for the taxi—not that whistle: it's a police whistle, which has a definite meaning in these parts. I shall never forget what happened when I tried to call a taxi with it."

"What did happen when you blew the police-whistle?" asked Peter as the taxi drew away from Courtesy Square.

"Well, we were very hard up when we first came here, and our little charwoman suggested, that a police whistle would serve the extra purpose of calling a taxi, if we didn't blow it too loudly. It worked all right for a time, although I noticed once or twice that, when I blew it outside the 'Anchor,' all sorts and conditions of loafers slunk out of the brightly-lighted public-house door and melted away into the night: I suppose they had something on their consciences.

"But one wet night, when I was late in starting, and Mary was away, so that there was no one in the house to fetch a taxi, I stood on the doorstep and blew the whistle rather loudly. No taxi came; but after a time I heard an answering whistle, and then another, and I noticed that a regular crowd had assembled in the square and was peering over the hedges at our house. I flew indoors again, I was frightened that the police would really come."

"And did they?"

"No; but when Reggie Tirebuck called for me, half an hour later, because he was tired of waiting for his dinner, there was still quite a crowd outside: I suppose they were waiting for the murderer to come out."

CHAPTER XXIV

TIREBUCK DISCOVERS HIS LOSS

THE dinner at the "Italie" was a complete success: they had *hors d'œuvres*—such Italian *hors d'œuvres, minestre,* grey mullet boiled with a sprig of black fennel, an omelette, a *sauté* fowl, tartlets made of fresh fruit, ices and *petits fours* washed down by a bottle of foaming Barbéra, with black coffee and a cigarette to follow.

Lesley felt as if she was back in Rome, dining at the restaurant under the Capitol, with a Bersagliere band playing in the Piazza di Venezia. And her pleasure was accentuated because it was Peter who sat opposite her, looking after her wants with the charming deference which was like a relic from the generation of Addison, Peter, in whose blue eyes, notwithstanding the fine network of wrinkles at the corners, burned unquenchable youth.

Neither of them thought of analysing the feelings inspired by the other: Lesley was too happy to do anything but live in the present, and Peter, after the first shock of thinking that Lesley and Clarence Verity were in love with each other, had accepted the inevitable: they met as old friends: that it gave them exquisite pleasure to meet excited no comment in Lesley's breast: like Peter she took it for granted, and accepted it as a gift from the gods.

But whatever motive had brought Peter to England that April, when he was freed from his work by the little hitch between the Italian Government and the excavators on the Aventine, from the moment when he made up his mind that he had lost her, he realized that he loved Lesley.

He reasoned the whole thing out that night in his room at the Hotel Panizzi, in a cul-de-sac backing on the British Museum, where he was staying because he hated the noise of large hotels. What could be more reasonable than that two such splendid young people as Lesley and this Clarence Verity should be in love with each other? It was certainly not a coincidence that Verity had bought her flat, and was keeping it unchanged, and it was obvious that Lesley was embarrassed when he had mentioned the man's name; it struck him that she was hiding something.

Peter sat up very late thinking the matter over. He decided that there was some quarrel. Before he went to bed he came to the conclusion that he must try to act as mediator. But there was no doubting the welcome that Lesley had given him, as an old friend—how he wished it could have been as a lover! And surely he might permit himself to take advantage of these golden opportunities of enjoying her society before he took that message back from her to Clarence Verity in Rome.

For a glorious week Peter was waiting for Lesley every afternoon when she came out of the office: they used to meet in the Fountain Court of the Temple, because it was more like Italy than anything else in London, and was only a minute's walk for her. Then she chose whether she would go and have tea at the "Carlton," or taxi down to Kew or Richmond or Hampton Court.

Peter got up early and slaved till four o'clock at his books: he had taken over Lesley's bibliography work, the greater part of it, because he wanted her to be free to give him her society. He only left her sufficient to give him the excuse to go on paying her the generous salary, which he had insisted from the beginning was the

price of research work of such an arduous nature. At four o'clock he changed his linen, and put on another suit, still of blue serge, in time to meet Lesley, and he did not leave her until she dismissed him, towards midnight.

Then Reginald Tirebuck, who up to this had regarded Peter as being an old fossil of no account, began to grow restive. He made imperative claims on Lesley's time, and she, still staggering under the obligations which he had confered on her, curtailed her excursions with Peter, and divided her leisure time between him and Tirebuck.

But though she was just as interested in her work, and though she was docile, and as charming as ever when they dined together, and went to picture exhibitions and first nights, and the great literary and artistic at-homes given by their mutual friends, Tirebuck perceived that her soul was afield.

At first he found it difficult to define the subtle change in her manner: she was gayer than usual and surer of herself: she seemed in some inexplicable way to have become more womanly and, at the same time, to have grown away from him. Her gaiety, and the frankness of her friendship, built up an impenetrable barrier between them. And the worst of it was that, with this change of manner, she grew every day more beautiful and, to his eyes, more desirable.

But he soon perceived why it was that Lesley's heart and soul had drifted out of his sphere of influence, leaving him nothing but the shell of her friendship: the crown which he might have worn had passed to Peter Webbe. While he, Reginald Tirebuck, was waiting for her to become so absolutely his that he had only to propose for her to accept, the tide, which had been flowing strongly in his direction, turned, and he was forced to stand by and see her being swept out of his reach.

How should he ever forgive himself? For weeks this treasure had lain at his feet if he had chosen to pick it up, and now it had gone for ever. He would have to do without that gracious presence, which had been

irradiating every moment of his work and his leisure. Every morning he had wakened sure that the sun would shine all day: every night he had gone to sleep with the feeling of perfect content which follows a long summer day.

He had been the man in possession of her companionship after he had almost lost it by conventional timidity. She had been his, more than he knew, while he was waiting for the walls of Jericho to fall. Ken Western went back to Italy, because he could not bear the sight of Lesley becoming irrevocably another's, though he had never dreamt of winning her himself.

The blow was a crushing one to Tirebuck: he had failed to give the signal, but his whole heart had been in her keeping. He loved every detail about her—her beautiful head, the perfect sympathy of her expression, when she was giving herself up to be amused or interested, the grace of her movements, the way she dressed, the splendid vigour of her physique, and above all, the admirable self-restraint which had enabled her to remain, so long as he desired it, quite impersonal in their relations, when she came to join him at his work—and this though he had taken pleasure in her hospitalities when she was rich and popular, and had filled her with gratitude by the burnt sacrifice he had made for her.

And now he must stand by and see Lesley Brydges, Lesley Brydges with her delicious inexhaustible personality, become another man's wife; he would never have such an irradiation in his life again. He cursed himself for a dull fool not to have perceived the gift which the gods had laid on his threshold. He knew that it had gone, that it could not be regained in a life-time.

And the tragedy of it was that he was one of those whose wounds are never healed.

Gradually he released her from engagements, though they still worked side by side, and Lesley, not realizing that he was sacrificing more, in doing so to ensure her happiness, than he had done when he severed his connection with Abingdon, allowed herself to be monopolized by Peter.

But though her happiness made her blind to the real reason of Reginald Tirebuck's gradual withdrawal from her life, she could not shut her eyes to the fact that, sooner or later, when Peter was called back to his work in Rome, these golden days must come to an end. Sometimes the thought of what must follow daunted her; she seemed to see a vision of her life stretching ahead like a grey road threading a plain. And to her eyes no flowers grew by that roadside, and the sun never shone on it.

She knew now, beyond any possibility of doubt, that she would never marry Tirebuck: sometimes she wondered what it was, that had brought her to the state of mind in which she had contemplated it. And yet he was as dear a friend as ever; nor did she fear the outcome, if he should ask her to become his wife. For life would be grey when Peter went back to Rome, whether she found another post in journalism, or accepted Agnes's offer and went to work with her at the Maison Sorrel.

It never entered her head that Peter loved her. From her childhood he had been her trusted friend. And what was more natural than that these days, which were so crowded with happiness for her, were for him only an incident in a life-long friendship. For Peter, on his part, made no sign; to do so would have been an offence against his code of honour. Was not Clarence Verity waiting in the flat in Rome, which would again be Lesley's home, for the years to right the error that separated them? What the error was Peter did not know. In his honest simplicity it never occurred to him to think of it except as a lovers' quarrel. He was far too humble to believe that Lesley's frank pleasure in his own society had its root in anything but friendship.

At last the blow fell. One morning towards the middle of June Peter received a letter from Commendatore Boni. They were friends so intimate that the great archæologist had written to him in his own Venetian dialect to say that the hitch between the owners on the Aventine and the Italian Government had been settled,

and that he was now free to proceed with his excavations whenever he chose ; and Commendatore Boni added, that, if he came at once, he himself would come and give any assistance he could for a fortnight.

No doubt arose in Peter's mind as to complying. What was there to keep him to England beyond the pleasure of Lesley's society ? And this he had felt, from the moment when he first suspected Clarence Verity of being her lover, was an offering which he had stolen from the altars of the gods.

Not only must he go, but he must try to take some message from Lesley which would bring Clarence Verity to her side. The only difficulty was how to broach the subject to her, for though he had spoken of her father's flat, and how it was being kept unchanged, several times, Lesley had but once mentioned Verity's name to him. And Peter, a man of deep reserve himself, shrank from intrusion on her reticence.

The letter came to him on Monday morning, after they had spent a glorious day together at Canterbury, partly amid the magnificent Gothic of the Cathedral and its surroundings, but specially, as far as Peter was concerned, in eyeing out the handiwork of the Romans at St. Martin's, and the more ancient St. Pancras's.

When he went to meet Lesley he found her already awaiting him in Fountain Court, resting on a seat, with one arm laid along the back. She looked a model of sinewy grace, and her face was beautified at the moment by expressing the day-dreams which were chasing each other through her brain.

Then she caught sight of him advancing to meet her, and she knew, by the short steps which he was taking, that he had something on his mind.

"I have had bad news, Lesley," he said, coming to the point at once, "which at any other time I should have thought good news. I have to go back to Rome immediately, because Boni is going to commence work now, instead of going away for a holiday : this hitch with the Government has already taken up so much time."

"But aren't you glad, Peter? I should have expected you to want to go by aeroplane, so as not to lose one minute by the way."

He had it on his lips to say, "I should be glad if I could take you with me, Lesley," but his sense of chivalry forbade him. He stood before her silent for a minute, his head bent, a troubled frown on his forehead, then he said in his slow, absent-minded fashion, "No, I'm not glad."

Though she was stricken at the thought that Peter was going to pass out of her life again so soon, Lesley felt a little thrill of pleasure at his words. Was Peter regretting the end of their happy days too? She felt as though she was staking everything she possessed in the world on one throw, when she said in a low voice:

"Why?"

Peter did not answer. He could not trust himself to speak. He was wrestling with the demons of hope which the sight of Lesley had conjured up in his brain: his usually placid mind was powerless in their grip. So he and Lesley waited, and the roar of traffic up and down the Strand, softened by distance, came to their ears like the booming of waves. He had not joined her on the bench: he was still standing in front of her with his eyes on the ground, his hands clasped loosely behind him, in the familiar stooping attitude she remembered so well.

Why had he allowed himself to wake? Until he woke he had led the ideal philosopher's life, surrounded by the remains and studies of Antiquity, and almost as far from the temptations of St. Anthony as a hermit in the desert.

A cruel doubt had planted itself in his brain. If Clarence Verity was anything to Lesley, why could she be so frankly happy away from him? In all these weeks she had hardly mentioned his name. That thought pricked Peter: it would have been more natural if she had spoken of him freely. No, there must be something between them, something which was too deep to be

touched-on lightly. Besides, thought he in his humility, Nature had matched these two so well, and there was no reason why Lesley should love a man of forty-five, a dull philosopher, who had dreamed his life away. Though he never for a moment considered that she might return his affection, he longed to pour out his love for her, to tell her how she had revolutionized his thoughts, and swept him from the land of dreams to the unquiet sea of reality.

But why distress her? His words could avail him nothing, and they would complicate the matter he had in hand, for, if he spoke of his own feelings, he could not plead with her for Clarence Verity.

Lesley meanwhile was looking up at him with a tender smile on her lips. She could not see his eyes, but she knew, by the pucker on his high forehead and the twist of his sensitive mouth, that he was deep in thought. She noted the many wrinkles under his eyes and the deep furrows on the fine red skin of his cheeks. After taking it off to her, he had thrown his hat on the seat beside her, for the day was very hot. And she saw how much silver was mixed with the light brown of his hair, which crisped, no matter how short it was clipped, at the sides of his head.

So engrossed was she in her study of those features, which had grown to be dear to her in the last few weeks, that she almost forgot that she was waiting for an answer to her question.

Suddenly Peter raised his head: he had fought out his battle and the way was clear. His kind blue eyes met Lesley's straight. And he smiled the little smile of complete understanding and trust, which comes to the eyes and lips of a man when he loves. All through the next few hours, in the midst of her pain, Lesley's mind conjured up a vision of Peter as he looked at that moment, and the memory comforted her.

"I am sorry to go," he said, "because it will put an end to our pleasant meetings. But this time it will not be so long before we meet again, Lesley; I shall come

back to London. But, *chi lo sa*, before that happens I may see you in Rome!"

He was the old impersonal Peter again: he had shut the door upon her hopes.

"It will be a long while before I come to Rome," she said, getting up.

"Don't go yet," said Peter. "I have something to say to you—about your old flat and the man who lives in it."

"Cotty Verity?"

"I thought his name was Clarence."

"It is: but everyone calls him Cotty."

"Do you know why he has taken your flat?"

Lesley's colour deepened: she was obviously taken aback by his question; for a moment she seemed about to answer it, then she gave a nervous laugh, and turned away. "Poor Cotty," she said, "I'm afraid I inoculated him with a love for Rome; I used to talk to him about it a great deal in the days when I took life seriously: come along, Peter, and have tea: I suppose our precious hours are numbered." She spoke flippantly, to hide her feeling.

Peter followed her out of Fountain Court with a frown on his forehead; it was evidently more serious than he thought, for Lesley was determined not to take him into her confidence. The next move must be with Clarence himself.

But how was he to bring this about?

It was a good thing that he was returning to Rome. For, if Clarence was not there when he arrived, he would probably follow soon; he seemed to be in constant residence at Trinità del Monte.

Yet, when he got there, how was he to approach a man, who was almost a stranger to him, on such a subject?

Frankly, he did not know, but he was willing to venture anything for Lesley's happiness, even though to do so would be to bar the door against his own hopes.

His only reward would be if Lesley, when she was married, should take a fancy to living in Rome. Then he might occasionally see her happiness. But there was

small hope of this: she had spread her wings now, and, if she were married to a young and wealthy husband, fond of sports and theatres and dancing, she would want to live at some place which possessed more opportunities than Rome.

He decided that he would go and see Clarence on the very first evening after his arrival, and put things right between them.

CHAPTER XXV

EXIT CLARENCE VERITY

A FEW evenings later Peter went down to Victoria Station to see about the registration of the large box of valuable books, which he was taking back to Italy with him on the following day. It was just before dinner-time, the hour when travellers arrive from the Continent.

As he left the office to which he had been directed, he espied Clarence Verity, attracted, he felt sure, by some telepathic influence. He went up and shook hands with him.

"This is rather a funny coincidence, our meeting here," he said. "Only a day or two ago I was talking about you to Miss Brydges! I did not know that you were such a friend of hers, when I met you in Rome. She is dining with me to-night at the 'Italie.' Will you come and join us?"

"I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid I can't." He hesitated and stammered out, "The fact is, I don't want Miss Brydges to know that I am in England."

"Why ever not? Won't she think it strange, when you're such friends?"

"No; she knows quite well why I don't come."

"I hope you won't mind my saying what I am going to say to you, Mr. Verity. I can see that there has been some trouble between you two, and though you may eel that I have n o right to interfere, because I am almost

a stranger to you, I am an old friend of Miss Brydges, and have her happiness very much at heart. Can't I be of any use in bringing you together again ? "

" I'm afraid that it is past the wit of any man."

" Don't say that : it's never too late to mend," said Peter. Shyness made him sententious. He was more convinced than ever that there had been a lovers' quarrel. " I think I can answer for Miss Brydges, that she is genuinely fond of you."

" You're making it rather hard for me," said Cotty with a queer look in his eyes, as though someone had hurt him.

" Don't you love her ? " asked Peter simply.

Cotty said nothing for some moments. His attention appeared to be engrossed with a sparrow, which was flying about under the roof. He gave Peter the impression that he was seeking for a loophole to escape like the sparrow. At last his lips twisted themselves into the semblance of a smile and he, reluctantly, began to speak.

" I don't know that this is the time or the place to speak of one's family affairs. But you force it on me. I do love Miss Brydges : I told her so. If insanity was a ground of divorce, I might have been able to marry her—always allowing that she cared enough for me : my wife is incurably mad. One day when Miss Brydges was struggling with poverty I lost my head, or something, and begged her to share my life with me. I told her that I wasn't free to marry her : I don't excuse myself : I was hard put to it, God knows, before I spoke. I think it was the idea of her having to work in a shop which goaded me to it : it seemed such a dog's life for her.

" She behaved like an angel. But she begged me to quit England, and never to see her again. Later, she relented, and, in answer to my entreaty, agreed to leave an address where I should find her a year from that day at her Club. She did so. But, when the time came, I was too great a coward. I wasn't sure of myself : I'm not sure of myself yet : that's why I don't want to see her."

Peter realized what an effort it had been for him to speak :

he was furious with himself for making such a blunder: he held out his hand. "I'm frightfully sorry," he said; "but these things sometimes right themselves, and I'm sure that Miss Brydges will wait for you."

He was sure: the sinking at his heart told him that.

Cotty shook his head slowly.

"I'm afraid not: Miss Brydges could never care for me in that way: she made it only too clear, when I forfeited the right to her friendship."

"You must excuse my asking such an indefensible question; but do you mean to imply that, if your wife were dead, there would be no hope of Miss Brydges's marrying you?"

"I do," said Cotty, grimly.

Peter seemed overwhelmed in a fresh flood of thought. He clasped his hands behind his back, and began to walk up and down, with his head bent: in that attitude his scholar's stoop was more pronounced.

"Whatever are we to do?" he said, falling into his habit of thinking aloud.

"We?" said Cotty sharply. His keen blue eyes met Peter's, as he stopped in his walk, and raised his head.

The two men continued to eye each other in silence—Cotty, upright, ruddy, the man of action, waiting intrepidly for something to happen, which he could not control—Peter, just as tall and broad-shouldered, though stooping in his pose, the philosopher and dreamer, but with his mind preparing to meet the crisis. To a man of his reserve it was as difficult to speak in this matter as it had been to Cotty, but, realizing what it had meant to Cotty, he listened to the call of chivalry.

"I love her too," he said.

"And she?"

"I never thought about it: I took it for granted that she was in love with you."

"There's no chance of it," said Cotty. "If you love her, why don't you speak to her?"

"Are you sure that I shall not be wronging you?"

"Quite. In any case, I shall probably never see her again."

"Indeed I hope that, if I have this great happiness, there may be the same come and go between the flat on Trinità del Monte and my *palazzo* which there always was," said Peter with grave courtesy.

CHAPTER XXVI

PARIS OR THE COLONIES

THE shadows were lengthening in Courtesy Square. The full heat of a June day was over, and the little pollard limes, whose thick shade the fiercest sun could not penetrate, were filling the air with fragrance. There was a pleasant hush: through an open window of a cottage further down the Square came the song of a caged bird. He filled the silence with music: it was only when he paused, rapt, so it seemed to Mary and Lesley as they rested by the window of their little sitting-room, in the wonder of his own melody, that they noticed the low hum of bees in the lime flowers. It was very warm, though a breeze fanned the casement curtains to and fro, and made the little poplars, in the garden of the House of the Weathercock, curtsy.

Mary had just come in with her arms full of household shopping, and, finding Lesley at home, deposited her parcels on the table and joined her at the window.

"It must have been very hot in the City," she said, taking off her hat carelessly, and sitting down in the big arm-chair with her hands loosely folded on her lap, in the restful attitude which was characteristic of her.

"Yes, it was hot," said Lesley in a dispirited voice, "but fortunately I was able to get through my work early."

"I had a long sitting with Amos Field for that new

portrait of Mrs. Goldpin, and I find that he wants me to sit for the draperies of another portrait; so I'm rather in luck's way," said Mary.

"How splendid!" said Lesley, making an effort to throw off the depression, which would creep over her, when she remembered that this was Peter's last day in England. "It's really lucky to get model work so late in the season, isn't it?"

"Yes; but this is about the end of it, as far as I am concerned. Mr. Field is the last of my artists to leave, and he goes into the country when he has finished this portrait. I shall have to take up my needlework again, or else go back to the tea-shop. I think it will be the needlework, because that will be of more use to me out in the Colonies."

"I can't bear to hear you talk of the Colonies, as if it was all fixed and settled: perhaps you won't go after all!" cried Lesley, stung to the quick at the thought that Mary would be the next to leave her, and sore because she seemed to look forward with such equanimity to the parting.

"I shall go," said Mary. "Nothing can stop me now."

"But why? For the first time for years you have work, which is not only well-paid, but really congenial. Why throw it up, and take the chances of hardship out in the Colonies?"

"Because I'm no longer a girl but a woman, I suppose, and I'm tired of earning money just for myself. Here I work that I may live, there I shall work that others may live. Here, if I fell out of the ranks, no one would miss me: there I shall be of use to the community.

"You say this work is well-paid and congenial. It is. You remind me that for the first time for years I am brought into touch with interesting people, and spending my days in beautiful surroundings. So I am. But it is ephemeral: I have been successful as a model simply and purely on the strength of my personal appearance. Sooner or later I shall lose this trick of expression, which inspires artists like Prendergast: and what is there before me then but

the workhouse and a pauper's grave? It's the same old story of woman's work over again.

"That's my case: now let us take yours. You were successful at the beginning because you had influential friends. But that research work at the Colonial Office would have led to nothing: if it had lasted years and years, you would have been turned off at the end of it, and have found yourself among the other women who crowd into registries and agencies to get employment, without any just claim for a good wage, because you would be untrained, and inexperienced in anything but that particular branch of work. And though you might have got posts to tide you over the next few years, each time that you came to the end of them, you would have found the getting of other work more difficult, because each time you would have been that much older, and less capable of holding your own against the incoming tide of youth and energy, which was seeking similar employment."

"But it didn't last long, and I found other work which might have led to success."

"Yes, you met Meyer Bayswater, and he engaged you to work on *Last Week*, not on any merit of your own, for any business qualifications, but because your looks were pleasing to him, and he wanted to have the diversion of making love to you. Unconsciously you had unlocked the door to success, which is open to every woman with attractions, as long as she keeps her youth. For, if you are willing to pay the price, you can buy success easily enough in whatever branch of work you take up, whether it be Musical Comedy, or the Arts, or business.

"But it was distasteful to you, and you left him, and again a friend stepped into the breach. What happened, when you tired of that place? You tried to get work for yourself, and you failed; you failed, that is to say, until you took the step, which at the time seemed to entail a loss of social prestige, of becoming a shop-girl—and this, mark you, only on the strength of your personal appearance, because you have the kind of figure, which shows off fashionable clothes to their best advantage!"

" But still it was work, Mary ! "

" Oh yes, it was work, especially when you became a saleswoman. And having had the courage to step, as you thought, out of the social rank in which you were born—though, thank Heaven, women are beginning to ignore the presence of such a worthless barrier as social prestige, when they have to earn their bread !—you had independence in sight at last. You saw that, by dint of application and perseverance, you could one day attain the little home and garden, which form the bourne of most people's desires as the years creep over them, and they look forward to their old age. And you were happy, although the work was not soul-satisfying, because you saw promotion at the end of it, and, with promotion, an income on which it was possible to live."

" Well then," said Lesley, " you're going against your own argument, because I did get this work and it was not ephemeral : I should have gone right ahead : it was sheer bad luck that stopped me."

" But you have to reckon bad luck and bad health among the chances in earning your living. The accident of ill-health threw you back on the registries and agencies again, with the result which you know. Now you are reinstated, this time with the chance of a progressive income. But you owe your position absolutely to Reginald Tirebuck."

" I know that, but I don't see anything derogatory in it."

" There isn't anything derogatory in it, as regards you yourself : it's the principle which is so wrong. You must remember that there are hundreds of women like you, healthy, capable, intelligent, anxious and willing to work at anything, which will give them a fair livelihood, who are forced to live on odd jobs, scavengers for work, with no hope of providing for their future except at the hands of men, who are willing to help them, either out of personal feelings, or because, like Meyer Bayswater, they see a chance of taking toll of their youth !

" Look at Agnes. She was lucky enough to save sufficient money out of her family failure to have a business training. But she began as a secretary at two pounds a

week, and she would have ended as a secretary at two pounds a week. And how would her case have differed from yours or mine in the end, when there was no more work to be had? Instead of this she bought her freedom from Dolly Illington, and now, of us all, she is the only one who is independent and prosperous. She had weighed her chances when she ran away with him, and, if she has suffered, that is her own affair: it is certain that nobody else has been harmed."

"I remember," said Lesley, "a French author, who came with an introduction to us in Rome, saying to me, 'It is the virtue of your English women which most astonishes me; some of them who are quite beautiful, because they have no *dot* and do not marry, work all their lives like machines. Such a thing would be impossible in France!'"

"If low wages stand for anything there is not much inducement for morality," said Mary dryly. "And, at the best, virtue is a negative quality—its existence taken for granted, its non-existence a token for throwing stones. I suppose that there are still people in this world who would draw back lest the hem of their garments should touch Agnes. But I am not one of them. To me her life is more useful and full of meaning as it is, than if she were grinding away in the treadmill of necessity, with all her splendid vitality and womanliness withering like plants in a darkened room. At least she has realized herself. It is not every woman who is born to be a wife and mother: some of us are celibates by choice and some by circumstance. But, from the first, I knew that she was bound to go out of the ranks of the women who grow old in the cheaper boarding-houses and clubs of London. And Dolly Illington was just the type of man who would capture the imagination of such a gallant creature, so fearless, and generous, and full of the joy of life."

"But you don't advocate that way of escape, Mary!"

"Good heavens, no! Only it sickens me that such a state of things should exist. Don't you see now what I mean about the Colonies? Here the chances are against

women like ourselves earning independence. And we are crowded out by the daughters of small shopkeepers, and so on, who have a thorough business education on the one hand, and on the other our wages are cut by well-to-do girls, who take up this trade or that as a means of amusing themselves. Agnes' life and mine show the alternative. Through the medium of friends you stand as one of the successful ones: but friends are almost as helpful as capital."

Mary paused: she was wondering if the same temptation which overtook Agnes had come into Lesley's life, for Lesley had never told her the whole story of Cotty Verity.

"It's the waste of all which really matters that hurts," she said at last, "the waste of the womanhood of our women, of their power to give, of their courage, of the grand vitality and energy, which are stored in their minds and bodies in this age of wider education and open-air sports. This generation has improved the physique of its women and has strengthened the calibre of their minds: it has raised up a new ideal of womanhood, founded not on the equality of the sexes, but on the possibility of friendship between them. Who does not recognize the nobility of friendship between man and man? Have not the great thinkers and romancers and poets of all ages sung its praises? And why not friendship, and its ally comradeship, between men and women? We do not ask for the elimination of sex. If there be any who do, they are the drones, the shirkers, the unnatural products. As well ask the wind to cease scattering the seeds of the sycamore tree! Let there be sincerity between the sexes: there will be no more mention of the word equality when we have learnt to translate it into friendship."

"But friendship and the hand of friendship are the last things that men offer to women."

"That may be. But they cannot shut their eyes to the new type of womanhood, which has sprung up in the last generation, though they have offered no outlet to the great force of energy which it represents. They have turned it loose on the world and, when it seeks to find some work to

do, they try to dam it up with the old barriers of convention, which were sufficient to hold in check the aspirations of the uneducated, hampered, unhealthily brought-up women of past generations. Sooner or later the world will realize that it has to reckon with the superfluous women, the women who have neither homes of their own nor work which is useful enough to give them a claim to citizenship. Already it has opened its eyes to the fact that 'the women are knocking at the door'!"

"How strange that you should say that! A great statesman quoted it to me in Rome before I dreamt of coming to England to work!"

"It is a truth, and as such bears repeating," said Mary sententiously.

There was a long silence between the two girls: both were busy with their thoughts. In the cottage next door, the father of the family had just come back from work; they had not heard him come in, but he had gone as usual straight to the piano, and through the window they could hear him playing childish tunes to the babies before they were packed off to bed. When he stopped, they heard the little voices clamouring for more; it was easy to imagine how he smiled across at their mother, and willingly played on for "just one more tune!" Then came the usual pause for good-nights, and, a few minutes later, the scent of tobacco floated out on the June air: he had settled down to his pipe.

The singing bird down the Square was silent now, and all the bees had filled their sacks with pollen, and swung heavily away. Out in the streets the older children were beginning to gather, though the sun was still too high for them to riot in the wild games they would play in the dusk.

A car turned into Courtesy Square and drew up close to the iron gate at the top of the flagged path, which ran past other cottage doors to No. 7A. Presently Agnes came down the path. When she caught sight of Mary and Lesley sitting by their low window, half hidden from view by the flowering geranium on the sill, she called out merrily, "Hallo, you two! How quiet you look! I

believe I have caught you both indulging in a daydream! Will you let me into the House of Repose?"

Lesley rose with a pleased cry of "Agnes!"

"May I come in? I want to carry you both off with me to Hampton Court. It's been so hot all day, and it will be heavenly by the river to-night."

"Are you going down straight away?" asked Lesley, as she opened the door.

Agnes kissed her in her old impulsive way. "Yes, I've just come from the shop; pack up a tooth-brush and a comb and come along."

"I can't," said Lesley, "I'm dining with Peter Webbe."

"Then of course you can't," agreed Agnes, smiling at Mary. They did not know that it was Peter's last day in England: Lesley had not told them, because she felt in need of all her self-control, and she dreaded their sympathy.

"But you'll come, Mary?"

"I'd love to."

"And there's another thing," said Agnes. "I've heard to-day that the head of my workroom is leaving me to get married, and I want to offer the post to you, Mary, before anyone else."

"It's very dear of you, Agnes, but I'm not up to the work."

"Don't talk like that; I know quite well what your value would be in the workroom: you're the very woman for it; I'd rather have you in that place than anyone else I could lay my hands on. And it's a good salary, you know."

"I'm very sorry, dear, but I can't take it: I've quite made up my mind to go to the Colonies."

"To the Colonies?" cried Agnes in disgust. "Which one?"

"Canada for choice."

"Have you got a job?"

"No, but I'm going out there in an emigration party, and the lady in charge of it tells me that a competent dressmaker's or milliner's assistant, who is willing to go

out to one of the wheat-towns in the North-West, is sure of ten dollars a week—two pounds—from the very start, soon rising to twenty, if she is too good to lose."

They were surprised by an outburst from Agnes.

"Well, whatever you do, don't marry a farmer in Canada. Dolly was out there for a while before I lived with him; he has a ranch there which he sometimes visits for the sport. He said it made him perfectly sick to see the way in which farmers' wives were treated out there—slavey and agricultural labourer combined—getting up at half-past five on those terrible winter mornings, with the thermometer twenty below zero, to milk the cows and give the men their breakfast, doing the whole of the house-cleaning and cooking and laundrying and mending, working almost up to the birth of their children, and about again afterwards, working as usual, before women would be out of bed in England. He said that the men out there had no chivalry about their wives, but just treated them as part of the machinery for making a farm pay."

"I like that better than his way of treating women," said Mary hotly. "I think it's far nobler and more chivalrous."

"You mustn't be too hard on Dolly," said Agnes. "I know his faults better than most people. But I know that if he had had me out there on his ranch, and I was going to have a child, he would have taken me into Winnipeg or Chicago, and given me the best doctors and every possible comfort, if he had to sell the ranch for it. He's awfully generous; he wrote the other day to ask if I wanted some more money put into the business."

"But his whole attitude to women is wrong, Agnes," said Mary. "You must excuse my saying that I don't think he's the right man to throw stones at these keen farmers."

"It's the life, not the men that Dolly hated to see. He liked the men, and respected them, and they respected him, because he's such a splendid horseman and such a grand boxer. But he hated seeing the women work so

hard with their hands. He says they lose their looks completely, and get prematurely old if they are at it long, and have to go through awful hardships. In summer sometimes they can't get a bath for months, because the water has failed."

"I shouldn't mind anything," said Mary, "if I was leading a wholesome life like that, doing woman's proper work in the world, and rearing up a family for a man I loved, on land which we took as God left it. Far from frightening me, the thought of those women lights a flame that burns in me, urging me away from all these things, these soul-deadening luxuries for which the body craves in the midst of civilization. I want the hills and the open spaces. I want the great free life, with sky above and all round and the earth as my garden. I have done with houses and streets, with this life of cramped conventions and closing of the eyes to real facts. I know I shall have to work hard, that my hands will be coarsened, that my hair will lose its lustre, and my body its poise. But I should lose all these from natural causes in a few years' time, anyhow. Oh, I could laugh at the thought of the fripperies which will be thrown away—not only fripperies of dress and household ornament, but fripperies of mind and soul!"

"Mary is right," said Lesley, "and I wish I had the grit to see the way as clear before my feet. It's fine and splendid to go from the ranks of the unwanted, the gentlewomen-casual-labourers, to a place where any healthy woman may become the pivot round which everything revolves: the *sine quâ non* of a home which is her own, rent free, and increasing in value all the time; the ancestress of a prosperous family in a virgin land."

"You're just like everyone else," said Mary impatiently. "Directly I mention the Colonies, you talk of marriage, as though that was the inevitable result. I know that, if you don't marry, it is not from lack of opportunity. But that's not the point. All women who go to the Colonies don't marry; there is plenty of work for women to do besides forming homes."

"The life is so hard," said Agnes.

"No harder than the life I have led for ten years in London; and out there they recognize workers as human beings. They do not think of them as mere machines, who should be satisfied with the dry crusts of existence, and forego all the joys of life."

Agnes remembered Dolly saying that being a farmer's wife in Canada reminded him of some place in East Africa, where he had been shooting lions, and a man's property was reckoned in wives. But she said no more. For herself, she thought it would be hateful to drudge on a farm all the year round, with blizzards in winter and droughts in summer, never to see civilization again till her youth was gone, cut off from all the luxuries and amenities which make life delightful. Also she had done with men, and, so far from being willing to undergo all the hardships of a Canadian farmer's wife for the sake of his love, and being the mother of his children, she could picture herself, as soon as she could afford to retire, being quite happy in an Eden without either Adam or the serpent. She was a lotus-eater by instinct: it was the lotus she had accepted from the serpent, not the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Still, she held her peace, and smiled indulgently, while Mary was announcing her intention of leaving an Egypt, which had yielded her no fleshpots, to go through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

But Lesley cried in dismay, "Whatever shall I do without you, Mary?"

Mary smiled her serene smile—she thought of Peter Webbe. "For the present you can afford to keep up the cottage without me, and have a servant, to make your time your own. Now that little Emma is a widow she will be glad to come and live with you, and look after you; and you know how faithful and simple she is!"

"Come and live with me!" said Agnes.

But Lesley shook her head. "I couldn't leave the cottage until it leaves me," she said, "for here I am in touch with all my friends. I shan't be lonely with Emma

to talk to: for she can tell me the tragedy and comedy of the lives of *the weeds that encumber the earth* in her class."

There was silence for a moment, and through the window came the voice of a neighbour scolding her child. "I'll give it to you, my boy, when I catch you!" she threatened.

"I don't suppose he'll mind," said Agnes, "if he has had a good run for his money. It's when you do wrong, and don't get a run for your money, that it seems hard luck to get caught and punished!"

She paused for a moment.

"After all, though, I don't think I regret anything very much; it's the consequences that matter in life, and for me the worst thing that happened was losing my ideals. It was a snapping of all the cords in the web of my thought, and, like the spider in Bruce's story, I have been busily spinning ever since to gain a fresh foothold on the meaning of things. You girls have not lost yours. If I read the signs aright, you, Lesley, will go back to your beloved Italy, and your life of beautiful things. As for Mary"—Agnes's voice grew tender—"her ideals have never been even so much as tarnished. You are the mother-woman, Mary, the true type, the giver, the helper, the smoother of rough paths.

"But I have lost them all! Once I believed in the God of the Israelites, now I have forgotten how to pray, except to a vague God of my own imagining. I thought I was loved, now I know that it was not love at all, but a thing with an uglier name. Oh, and there is much besides! I have been down into the world of men and women, not as you have been Mary, or you, Lesley, but as one knowing good and evil. Like Robert Services's Harpy, I feel as though I know 'by heart, from finish to start, the Book of Iniquity.' You remember what he says:

> 'Fate has written a tragedy; its name is
> "The Human Heart."
> The theatre is the House of Life, Woman
> The mummer's part:
> The Devil enters the prompter's box and
> The play is ready to start.'

"But, as I said before, I am through with that now, and when all is said and done, the sky is as blue and the trees are as pleasant. I do not find flowers less beautiful; and the low music of water rippling over loose stones in a brook, gives me the same joy as it did when I was a child. Yes, more than in childhood, for then these things were just part of a Universal Beauty, only dimly comprehended, and now that they have each their own meaning, they have an added value.

"So we each go our own ways, and I am contented. If I had not done it, I should still be working in the city, with every day stretching out before me greyer than the last, going round and round like a wheel in a rut, with no rest or relief until it is worn out. Whereas now I am free!"

Mary laid a gentle hand on hers.

"But you might have married, dear," she said.

"I was thirty when I went away with Dolly. I thought he was the one man in the world for me. But, if I had married him, everything would have turned out just the same. I loved him, according to my lights, and I gave him what he asked. Do you think I am any worse than the woman, who takes a man's name, and yet knows in her heart that she is dishonest in the bargain she has driven? Or do I stand any worse in your eyes than the girl he has married, or her highly respectable relations, who would draw their skirts away from me, and yet, knowing the kind of man that he is, and how unfit he is to be the husband of that young girl, give her to him with all the solemn farce of a society wedding? She cannot love him: he is less lovable now than he was when he came into my life. She is marrying him so as not to lose her father's lands, or, at the best, she is made blind by his glamour, as I was. It's an awful thing, this attraction of type! I'm frightened of it, just as I'm frightened to look down into deep water, realizing how easy it is to drown in those depths!"

"But it must hurt you to think of him being married," said Mary.

Agnes shook her head. "No," she said, "I should have broken my heart over Dolly, if this thing had happened before I lived with him; it was my nightmare all along. Now I can regard the whole affair with equanimity: it's astonishing how matter of fact humanity is off the stage and out of the pages of a novel. I suppose it is because we try to avoid situations, just as the harassed dramatist or novelist racks his brains to create them!"

"But the whole principle is wrong," said Mary.

"I grant that. I know that my presence here would be irksome to Peter Webbe, for instance, or Reginald Tirebuck, and that even Ken, dear Ken, feels a barrier between us. Well, because I am a woman, I have to face that: it is all society can do to punish me: it is the world's form of saying, 'I'll give it to you, my girl, when I catch you!' If I was a man, of course it would say nothing, because, when it comes to that, Dolly is much worse than I am, and the world pats Dolly on the back, just now, and calls him a good boy.

"But, whatever people may think, they cannot make me worse than I am. I stand where I was in the Scheme of Things; my heart is the same; my soul, or my mind, or whatever you call it, is unaltered. I had only one thing to give Dolly, and I gave it. He had been kind to me and had given me everything which made life worth living. I was starving for sunlight and he gave me the power to stay out in it from morning till night, instead of being cramped in an office till the light was gone. I wanted leisure to read and think; he gave me that: it was more than money, it was life and the right to live so that my intelligence might grow as my body had grown. But for him I should have been dead to all the beautiful things of the world. How true it is what Zangwill says, that 'Death for us is all we have missed, all the periods and planets we have not lived in, all the countries we have not visited, all the books we have not read, all the emotions and experiences we have not had, all the prayers we have not prayed, all the battles we have not fought. Every restriction, every negation is a piece of death!'"

As Agnes finished speaking she rose. "How we talk!" she exclaimed. "Truly we women belong to the *Bandar-log!* How long will you take to get ready, Mary?"

"Only a minute," said Mary, collecting her parcels, and disappearing kitchenwards.

"I'm sorry you can't come, Lesley. What time are you dining with this wretched man?"

"He is coming to fetch me at eight: it has been a busy day," said Lesley.

"I like your Peter Webbe," commented Agnes meditatively: she had met Peter once or twice with Lesley.

"He's not my Peter Webbe."

"No, but he means to be!"

CHAPTER XXVII

EVE IN THE GARDEN

WHEN Mary pulled the front door to behind her, and the sound of her footsteps and Agnes's died away on the flagged path outside, Lesley rose and fetched her trowel to plant some young marigold roots, which Agnes had brought from her garden, in the little bed below the sitting-room window.

The sun had sunk behind the lime trees, and the square rang with the voices of the children playing their wild games in the cool of the evening. As Lesley stooped over her flowers, she wondered why she did not hear the plaintive cry of the little dumb child, which was so like the note of a wild bird. He never seemed to join the other children.

Lesley worked quickly so as to get all the marigolds into the kindly earth before the coming of Peter: she could not bear to see their drooping leaves; they had wilted with the heat.

The sunset of that long June day was beginning to bathe everything in its splendour when Peter came into Courtesy Square.

His head was hanging as usual; he had the same philosophical gait; but he was humming something, quite out of tune, as he came along, and his eyes, when he raised them to glance at passers-by, were shining. He hesitated a little, as he passed through the old Georgian gate on to the flagged walk between the cottages, and

when he came to Lesley's own green gate, so woefully in need of a fresh coat of paint, he paused.

Lesley looked round at him and smiled. "Well," she said. "You see Eve busy in her garden. I fear that you have come like Satan to lure her out of Paradise."

Peter leaned over the gate.

"How hot it is to-day!" he said. "Let's have a little dinner somewhere near by, and take a taxi and go for a run in the country: there's going to be a moon!"

"There's nothing I'd like better," said Lesley. "But you must let me finish planting these few marigolds, and then I won't keep you waiting a minute, while I wash my hands. You are before time, Peter."

There was silence for a moment.

"I wonder if the other Eve was tempted from her garden as easily," said Peter meditatively.

"Much more easily. To begin with, her temptation was greater, for the Serpent urged her to do something which she knew was wrong, and that's always exciting. Besides, there is no record that Eve was busy planting, and you know the proverb about idle hands and Satan."

"But Satan was not the rôle that I came to play," said Peter, with his serious smile.

Lesley looked up to retort, but something in his eyes made her change her mind, and she said, "Well, it's the chief rôle in the comedy of life: the part that Adam played in the tragedy *à trois* was a very minor one."

"I should like to play the part of Adam," said Peter.

"But he was turned out of the Garden of Eden, and had to toil in the sweat of his face for the term of his natural life, while I'm sure that the Serpent was clever enough to continue creeping through the hedge; was not his the better part?"

"Yes, but Adam lived with Eve in the Garden first; and God walked with them in the cool of the day."

Lesley's hands were no longer busy with trowel and roots, though she still knelt on the gravel path.

"Do you think that this memory was enough to sweeten their whole lives?"

"I do," said Peter seriously.

Lesley smiled, as she rose to examine her handiwork.

"Well, play Adam by all means," she said, "but we can't rehearse without the Serpent."

Peter opened the gate.

"The Serpent doesn't come in till the third act," he said, "we needn't wait for him, Lesley."

But Lesley, rather fearful of this new Peter, whose eyes were so unguarded, gathered up her trowel, and the brown paper which Agnes had wrapped round the plants, and fled.

"If you want to play Adam you must make yourself useful, Peter! Will you give my marigolds some water—you'll find a can in the kitchen—and then smoke a cigarette, while I make myself tidy?"

Peter went into the tiny kitchen, and filled a can from the tap. His eyes were tender as he noted the small shifts for economy on every hand, and how badly the whitewash needed renewing, and how rickety the wooden lid of the copper was. When he had finished he went into the sitting-room. But he did not light a cigarette: he stood by the window and listened, as Lesley had told him in one of her letters she herself listened, to the sounds of Courtesy Square.

"Why, Peter, you haven't been smoking!" cried Lesley, as she came in, with her hat on and her gloves in her hand.

"I've been thinking," said Peter slowly, "that it was really the rôle of Satan which I came to play!"

He crossed the room and put his hands on Lesley's shoulders, looking deep into her eyes.

"Listen to me," he said, "I want to take you, before July is very old, to a garden of the Gods on Lake Como. I want to speed with you in a silent launch, which has nobody on board but ourselves and the boatman, up the lake, ringed with crimson oleanders, till we come to a headland with three arches standing out against the sky. I want to take you into the little harbour where an old stone saint is bestowing his benediction on all who enter.

I want to climb the stair, which winds up the rock, with Italy's glory of flowers pouring out of vase and cleft behind you. I want to stand by your side in the magic garden terraced a hundred feet above the water, watching the sunset turn the lake to gold. I want to take you into the Castello built by the Visconti centuries ago, for air and security in summer, and to keep you there idling through an August as delicious as Eden. I want to sit with you by day in the shade of an acacia, watching quaint boats which sail as slow as time, and by night in a window where we look down on the fireflies of the garden and up at the stars, which hang over our heads like the grapes in an arbour. Those nights as soft as velvet, we never get them here, so I want to take you there for them."

"It would be for a very little while, Peter. I only get a fortnight's holiday."

"I don't want to take you there for a holiday, I want to take you there for ever!"

"Oh, Peter, you are getting poetical, and giving me a horrid heartache," cried Lesley, raising her head.

And Peter's hands, which had stayed on her shoulders, holding her, as it were, away at arms' length, slipped round until he held her in a close embrace.

"Will you come?" he said, his voice growing deep with feeling. "Is the temptation great enough, dear Eve, to compensate you for putting up with an old bore as a husband?"

"What old bore are you talking about, Peter?"

"One Peter, no Saint, who has left the keys of heaven in your keeping."

"Yes, I will come, my dear, my dear," said Lesley.

* * * * * *

Late that evening she said, "Why didn't you tell me before, Peter, that you loved me?"

"Because I thought you were in love with Clarence Verity, till he told me what had happened."

"Have you seen him, then?"

"We met by chance in Victoria Station to-day: I

asked him to dine with us to-night, but he wouldn't come."

"Poor Cotty! I was very fond of him: he was the dearest friend a woman could have had."

"It seemed so natural that you should love him," said Peter."

"I nearly did," said Lesley, "but unfortunately you have been my beau ideal ever since I can remember. When I was quite small, it was you who illustrated the book of my Imagination—it was you who were Sir Galahad and Sir Launcelot, you those flowers of chivalry, Gaston de Foix and the pale Knight of Ravenna, Guidarello Guidarelli—and you were Romeo, and all the other lovers rolled into one!"

"Oh, my dear, how could this have been, and I not know it! We have wasted the years, and I have grown old in the belief that I should never marry, because I carried in my heart your image as a child."

"The years are not wasted; we have been climbing all the time, although I fear I have cut no lasting notch on the mountain side of life to help the feet of others!"

"You have cut a deep notch for me," said Peter.

"For you? How have I done it for you?"

"You have shown me the meaning of my life. Browning says it much better than I could:

'How the world is made for each of us!
  How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment's product thus,
  When a soul declares itself—to wit,
By its fruit—the thing it does!

'Be Hate that fruit or Love that fruit,
  It forwards the General Deed of Man,
And each of the Many helps to recruit
  The life of the race by a general plan,
Each living his own, to boot.

'I am named and known by that hour's feat,
  There took my station and degree.
So grew my own small life complete
  As Nature obtained her best of me—
One born to love you, sweet!'"

* * * * * *

EPILOGUE—AT ASSISI

IN her cell at the Giglio at Assisi an old nun was nearing the end of her journey. She lay propped up on her pallet in the bare little whitewashed room, whose square window sunk deep in the wall, made a frame for sky and mountains such as Ghirlandajo painted in his picture of the Blessed Vision of Santa Fina at San Gimignano. From her pillows Sister Bonaventura could see the broad expanse of the heavens, untroubled blue except where billowy clouds sailing slowly by, threw shadows on the smiling Vale of Umbria. She could see the chain of everlasting hills, the hills whose beauty each Umbrian painter in turn from Gentile da Fabriano to Raffaello sought to immortalize, rising fold on fold across the Vale. And in the hollow she could trace the great dome of Saint Mary of the Angels, which marks the spot where Francis died.

But nothing of this earthly paradise came into Sister Bonaventura's vision ; nor did the Book of Devotions, which lay on the table by her bedside.

Earlier in the day she had asked the lay sister, who was attending to her, to hand her the English poet from her little shelf of books. And now she lay with her hand resting on the copy of Browning, which Lesley had given her those years ago, when she was passing through Assisi on her way to London. It was open at the fly-leaf, on which was pasted a photograph of the giver, once the favourite pupil of Sister Bonaventura, the English mistress at the Sacré Cœur. And with her dying hands the old nun clung to a letter in Lesley's handwriting.

She could no longer frame words, but her heart was singing the *Nunc Dimittis*. For Lesley, in the fullness of her happiness, had written one of her rare letters to tell her old teacher and friend that her wish, expressed so long ago, was vouchsafed. "I have met Love on the road of my life, as you prayed I should. He was so long in coming that twice I nearly turned aside with other companions, and so might easily have missed him. I have passed many years and travelled many miles to find him, though if I had only known it, dear Sister Bonaventura, when I sat in your little room those summer nights six years ago, and talked of the future, and what it might hold, he was close at hand, and I had turned my face from him."

It was with great pains that Sister Bonaventura traced the letter to its end. When she had finished, it seemed as though her vitality left her.

In the Convent chapel the bells were ringing for vespers, and the lay sister was on her knees before the crucifix, which was the only adornment on the bare walls of the cell.

Sister Bonaventura folded her hands on her breast. Her eyes were on the distant hills, but they were blind to all earthly beauty. She seemed to sink lower in her pillows. Though she made no movement, the younger woman was conscious that a change was taking place. She rose from her knees and drew near the bed in awe.

The old nun was smiling. Once she made a feeble effort to trace the sign of the cross. Then she lay very still. Just as the bells ceased ringing and the voices of the Convent choir floated into the silence, the letter fell from her hand. The Lord had let His servant depart in peace, according to His word.

THE END

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